Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
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Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles
The Knight's Respite

"H-HUH? ME?"
"RIGHT. I'D ALSO LIKE TO HEAR MORE ABOUT THAT."
"THAT'S RIGHT—I WANTED TO ASK FOR YOUR THOUGHTS BEFORE THE SLEEPOVER, LISELOTTE. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT SIR HARUTO?"

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

"I WANT TO STAY BY YOUR SIDE—AS BOTH AN INDIVIDUAL AND A NOBLE."
"CELIA..."
Rio unconsciously came to a stop and stared at her.

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Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Haruto Amakawa.

Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.

Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.

Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. In her previous life, she was an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.

Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.

Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.

Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under the protection of Rio, along with Miharu and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Flora Beltrum

Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Finally reunited with her older sister, Christina.

Christina Beltrum

First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Protected by Rio, together with Flora.

Roanna Fontaine

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. Traveling with Sakata Hiroaki as his attendant.

Sakata Hiroaki

A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

Shigekura Rui

A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Kikuchi Renji

One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...

Liselotte Cretia

Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.

Sendo Takahisa

Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

Sumeragi Satsuki

Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

Charlotte Galarc

Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Shows strong affection towards Haruto.

Reiss

A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.

Lucius

Commander of the mercenary squad, The Heavenly Lions. Killed in a battle with Rio.

Prologue: Reunion

Rio arrived at the Galarc Castle with Christina and Flora. Using his position as Honorary Knight, he smoothly bypassed all the necessary procedures to be shown to King Francois in a drawing room, its use restricted to royalty.

Apart from Rio, Christina, and Flora, those present in the room were Satsuki, Second Princess Charlotte, and everyone who attended the earlier marriage interview (Liselotte and her parents, Duke and Duchess Cretia; King Francois; and Duke Huguenot, Roanna, and Hiroaki, the representatives from the Restoration).

Incidentally, the first to come running after Rio brought Christina and Flora to the castle were Roanna and Duke Huguenot. Hiroaki hadn't moved as quickly, in contrast to them, and had joined up with them belatedly before they all made their way to this room.

Once everyone seated themselves, King Francois turned to Rio with a near exasperated look. "You truly exceed my expectations, Haruto."

The others in the room all had similar expressions.

"I sincerely apologize for creating a commotion..." Rio replied with a look of shame.

"It's a compliment. You've surpassed my expectations so much that the first feeling that comes to me about you is astonishment," Francois said with a cheery grin.

"It is exactly as I said before, no? I was certain that Sir Haruto would add to his list of distinguished services before long," Charlotte said proudly, a look of delight spreading across her whole face.

Francois chuckled in response. "I was surprised back when I heard you returned from the airship with Lady

Miharu by flight, but this incident has surpassed that. At any rate, it is wonderful news for both the Restoration and the Galarc Kingdom that Princess Christina and Princess Flora are alive. I should have prioritized my commendation before my surprise. Well done. This is truly a tremendous feat."

As he thanked Rio, Francois directed his gaze towards Christina and Flora, who were seated to Rio's right, before moving on to look at the section of the drawing room occupied by the representatives of the Restoration—Duke Huguenot, Roanna, and Hiroaki—in turn.

"The Restoration is extremely thankful for Haruto's deeds as well." Duke Huguenot bowed his head deeply and briefly expressed his strong feelings of gratitude. He must have been truly relieved, letting out an audible sigh.

"I'm so glad you're safe. Truly…so glad…" Roanna had tears in her eyes as she looked at Christina and Flora. Seated beside her was Hiroaki, who congratulated the two on their survival, albeit in a slightly sullen voice.

"It's great that you're alive."

His biggest crush had just rejected him, so his mind was in a complicated state. Liselotte was also in the room, but he seemed to be intentionally keeping her out of his field of vision. However, the fact he had returned to the room at all meant he felt either curiosity or concern about what happened to Christina and Flora.

"Thank you for worrying about us. We were able to return safely thanks to Sir Haruto, as you can see," Flora replied to Hiroaki and the rest of the Restoration with a gentle expression.

When Haruto's name came up, Hiroaki snorted with an annoyed look.

"Please tell us what happened, from the beginning to the end. How did you two go missing in the first place? How did Haruto get involved in all this?" Francois asked, looking at Rio and the princesses.

Christina exchanged a look with Rio and sighed heavily.

“Based on what you’re saying, it sounds like the message from Rubia didn’t arrive after all.”

Francois looked puzzled. “What…?”

“I will explain everything that happened to Flora and myself. It’ll be a long story, so please let me finish speaking before asking any questions.”

With that preamble, Christina began to explain what happened.

Chapter 1: Report

There were so many things to cover in Christina's explanation that simply retelling the whole sequence of events took over ten minutes.

"And that's all from me," Christina said, wrapping up her summary of everything that took place.

"Hmm… It is a joyous occasion that you both have returned to us safely, but this is an awfully concerning matter. There's no doubt the Proxia Empire played a part in the entire incident…but there's a severe lack of definitive proof." King Francois sighed with a stern frown.

"Yes. The mercenaries that appeared on our airship, in the Paladian village we were teleported to and at the Rubian fortress we visited, were all men with a connection to the Proxia Empire."

Whenever an unpleasant task had to be done, disposable mercenaries were used to hide the identity of the kingdoms involved. This was a commonly used tactic, but being on the receiving end of it was a source of endless frustration.

Duke Huguenot raised his hand after a beat. "I have one thing to report regarding that."

"What is it?" Christina asked.

"After Your Highnesses were abducted, your airship arrived at Rodania and caused an uproar. It was during this time that a man resembling Reiss, the ambassador from the Proxia Empire with known ties to Lucius, was spotted inside the central office. Celia was the one who reported this to me."

Christina's eyes widened in wonder, then glanced at Rio before asking after her well-being. "Professor Celia did that? Is she okay?"

Rio also seemed surprised and worried, as he had a stern look on his face.

"Yes. He apparently disappeared as soon as she spotted him."

"I see."

Christina, Flora, and Rio all sighed in relief.

"There's the possibility she was mistaken, but if it really was him, he must have snuck into the central office with some kind of goal in mind. Unfortunately, that is the full extent of what I know, but it may be related to all of this," Duke Huguenot said.

I'll have to ask her what happened once I return to Rodania. Perhaps Aishia was the one who protected her. Rio imagined the situation and vowed to return as soon as possible.

"At any rate, we currently lack the evidence to accuse the Proxia Empire. The only place we can really pinpoint would be the Rubia Kingdom. Their actions have broken the alliance agreement with not only the Restoration, but our kingdom as well—their movements hereafter will be a source of interest to us," Francois said with a cold smile, his anger simmering quietly.

The Rubia Kingdom's actions were an act of rebellion not only towards the Restoration, but towards the Galarc Kingdom as well. It was a much more serious matter than just having their trust besmirched.

"The Restoration intends to officially protest the Rubia Kingdom's actions," Christina said.

"Galarc will also make an official objection towards the way our honorary knight and alliance princesses were treated," Francois confirmed.

"So you'll declare your concerns. Isn't that pointless?" Hiroaki interrupted in a cynical tone.

"Yes, most likely so. The alliance is as good as broken already, so there's a high chance they'll ignore our objections," Christina replied in a cool voice.

“Expressing your concerns while knowing that is just incompetence, isn’t it?” Hiroaki grumbled sullenly.

“Indeed, this could have immediately triggered a war under different circumstances. But unfortunately, Rubia is a minor kingdom located far from us. If we mobilized the army, we would have to traverse across the land of other kingdoms, and there isn’t that much to gain from occupying a minor kingdom like Rubia. Invasion would be an extremely inefficient means of retribution, great hero,” Francois said, admonishing Hiroaki with the magnanimity of a king.

“The Restoration as it is now doesn’t have the strength to invade such a distant kingdom either,” Christina added.

“But if you just sit around idly after expressing your concerns, the other side will just look down upon you,” Hiroaki grumbled persistently.

“Of course, we intend on retaliating in some form or another. Spreading word of the Rubia Kingdom’s actions to our neighboring allies is a given, but… Hmm…” Francois brought his hand to his chin and thought for a moment. When his eyes landed on Rio, he suddenly chuckled to himself. “What if we sent Haruto to go on a rampage in the Rubia Castle? No doubt they’d be struck with terror if the man who single-handedly helped the two princesses to escape from their grasp came back for retaliation.”

Rio froze, pressed for a reaction. “Surely you jest…”

“Hey! Don’t involve Haruto in any of your strange ideas, Your Majesty,” Satsuki said, immediately scolding Francois.

“I’m joking, of course. As king, not even I have the authority to mobilize Haruto.”

“Even if you had the authority, don’t do it. It’s way too dangerous.” Satsuki made sure to emphasize her point despite Francois’s chuckles.

“Hah. I don’t know about Proxia, but if you sent that guy to cause a scene in Rubia, they’d be the ones in danger,” Hiroaki scoffed, dampening the conversation.

“That…may not be that far from the truth, but Haruto will still be in danger. He’d be antagonizing himself if he did such a thing,” Satsuki said with a pout.

Christina was in agreement with Satsuki. “The Restoration wouldn’t possibly allow Sir Amakawa to do something so dangerous after being so indebted to him either.”

“Hmph…” Hiroaki snorted, unamused.

Charlotte looked at Rio while adding to the conversation in a humorous tone. “While I would personally love to witness Sir Haruto’s continued success, it’d be a problem if people start fearing him too much.”

“With all due respect, I believe everyone thinks too highly of me…” Rio stated hesitantly.

Just how does everyone see me?

From the sound of the conversation until now, they seemed to think he was capable of storming a royal castle by himself—and dealing severe damage to the other kingdom.

At that, the entire room blinked blankly back at him. It was as though they were all asking what he was getting at.

“Say, Liselotte,” Charlotte suddenly said.

“Yes, Your Highness?” Liselotte replied immediately.

“Sir Haruto’s first public appearance was before the monster attack on Amande, right?”

“If you’re referring to when I first met him, then that would be correct,” Liselotte said, nodding.

“Since then, Sir Haruto’s list of feats have extended beyond imagination. He subjugated a powerful minotaur and repelled the breath of a demi-dragon with his enchanted sword. He defeated the strongest knight of the Beltrum Kingdom and instilled fear into a five-thousand-man army of pursuing troops, forcing them to withdraw. On top of that, he’s now eliminated the infamous veteran mercenary, Lucius. Considering the number of these exploits, can you still claim that we’re overestimating you, Sir Haruto?”

Charlotte listed off Rio’s most prominent exploits, then

turned to Rio with an elegant smile.

“It’s an honor to receive such praise, but when it comes to raiding a castle alone… I’m sure the Rubia Kingdom has its own formidable warriors,” Rio replied awkwardly.

If he prepared himself beforehand like when he rescued Celia from her wedding, he could potentially do it regardless of the strength of his opponents. However, that didn’t mean he could make such a public showing during times of peace. Rio wasn’t presumptuous enough to declare he could do it without any basis or knowledge of the opponent’s strength.

“If it’s renowned warriors of the Rubia Kingdom, then the first to come to mind is the Princess Knight, Princess Sylvie. However, from Princess Christina’s testimony, it doesn’t sound like Princess Sylvie could ever best Sir Haruto,” Charlotte pointed out.

“But there was a boy at the Rubian fortress who may be the fifth hero…” Rio reminded her of Kikuchi Renji, the boy he fought with at the fortress. Honestly speaking, not even Rio could grasp the true strength of the heroes.

“But you defeated that hero too, no?” Satsuki asked, cocking her head.

“I wouldn’t say I defeated him. I wanted to avoid getting too deeply involved, so I retreated before we could finish…”

After Rio answered Satsuki’s question, Hiroaki interrupted with a look of suspicion. “Was that guy really a hero?”

“Most likely. He had a halberd that could control ice, so I believe it was his Divine Arm.”

“Tch… A hero shouldn’t be losing so easily in battle. How pathetic.”

“You seem discontented by the hero’s defeat, but were you able to win against Haruto yourself?” Satsuki asked Hiroaki.

“Huh? Tch…” Hiroaki frowned. He opened his mouth to retort but recalled his past defeat against Rio and swallowed his words with a click of his tongue.

“How was the battle between the fifth hero and Sir Haruto in the eyes of you two?” Charlotte turned the conversation to Christina and Flora with a look of intense curiosity in her eyes.

Christina was the first to reply with an awkward glance at Rio’s expression. “Sir Amakawa took him on alongside the skilled mercenaries who were former subordinates of Lucius’s, but it looked to me like Sir Amakawa overwhelmed them from start to finish.”

“Yes, he was wonderful.” Flora nodded furiously, eyes sparkling as she replied.

“I’m sure it was an incredible sight. I wish I had been there to witness it—I’m so envious of you two.” Charlotte puffed up her cheeks and sighed sadly.

“Umm, you’d have to have been kidnapped to be there, Char.” Satsuki calmly pointed out the problem in her words.

“Bah. So envious indeed. Playing the hero more than actual heroes every single time…” Hiroaki grumbled bitterly. Roanna seemed to have overheard him, as she had a stiff expression beside him.

“We seem to have derailed the conversation a bit, but in all honesty, it would be more productive to have Haruto act alone than for me to increase military funding and have our army strike. But as I said before, I have no intention of doing such a thing.” With a wry smile and a hint of his true thoughts, Francois redirected the discussion back on topic.

“Damn right. Who cares about this guy’s great exploits or whatever. We were talking about what we’re gonna do to these Rubian guys for looking down on us, right?” Hiroaki immediately went along with Francois’s lead, not wanting to listen to praise for Rio anymore.

“If the fifth hero really is affiliated with the Rubia Kingdom, things become slightly complicated. For now, we’ll spread word of Rubia’s wrongdoing across other nations while requesting an explanation of the incident and the identity of the fifth hero. After that, we’ll consider imposing

realistic and constructive sanctions—this should be the right course of action," Francois explained.

"I agree with that. The Rubia Kingdom cannot be forgiven for this, but if they really have a hero on their side, we need to go through the correct procedure," Christina expressed quietly.

"Indeed. That aside… I understand you were pursuing your longstanding enemy, but you did well rescuing Princess Christina and Princess Flora from their debacle, Haruto," Francois said, looking at Rio in wonder.

Because Christina explained everything that had happened from her point of view, there was a lot of information missing about how Rio found the two of them. Thus, Francois was probably curious about that sequence of events as well.

"I obtained information on my journey suggesting that Lucius was in the Paladia Kingdom. After I made my way to the Paladian capital, I heard that First Prince Duran happened to be holding an event…" Rio explained briefly. Getting into too much detail would only complicate things, so he hid the fact he had snuck into the Proxia Castle and crossed swords with Emperor Nidoll Proxia.

"An event, you say?"

"It was a challenge where whoever could withstand one blow from Prince Duran was entitled to a reward. I decided to participate for the chance to ask about Lucius. I figured a renowned fighter like Prince Duran would have connections to a mercenary like him."

"I see. And so you easily withstood the blow from Prince Duran," Charlotte immediately assumed.

"That is correct. He told me where I could find Lucius—and that happened to be the village where the two princesses were."

"Hmm. I find it questionable that he passed you that information, but…Prince Duran claimed the Paladia Kingdom wasn't involved in the princesses' kidnapping,

right?” This was something Christina had mentioned earlier.

“How much do you actually believe in his words?” Francois asked.

“He was a rather difficult person to read, so I don’t trust him myself. However, I believe there is credibility to his claim that the Paladia Kingdom was not involved.”

“And why is that?”

“If Paladia had been involved in our abduction, there would be no need to teleport us to a shack in the middle of a deserted forest. They could have easily sent us to the Paladia Castle and confined us there.”

“That’s true. A very likely possibility. And thus, incomprehensible…”

“What do you mean…?” Christina seemed to sense something.

“Even if Paladia is unrelated to the abduction of Princess Christina and Princess Flora, the mercenary group behind everything *is* related to the Proxia Empire… And yet there is no clear motive here for Proxia.”

“…”

No one present noticed, but for a brief moment, something bitter flashed across Christina’s expression.

“What’s so incomprehensible about that, King Francois? I don’t quite get your point.”

Stop beating around the bush and get to the point— Hiroaki glared at Francois as though to say that. Francois continued without paying him any mind.

“If Lucius abducted the two princesses under the Proxia Empire’s order, he would have teleported them to the imperial castle instead of the Paladian forest. That would be the most secure way of confining them. There is a high risk of exposure when leaving them in a foreign nation—even temporarily—and he approached a foreign royal for help, although on a personal level. If Proxia ordered this, then Lucius was either unable to change the teleport destination from the Paladian forest, or he had some kind of goal in

sending them to that forest in particular…" Francois offered his hypothesis under the premise of Lucius moving on the Proxia Empire's orders. However, the incident this time just so happened to be unrelated—Christina and Flora were abducted purely for personal reasons.

Of course, there was a strong possibility they'd have been handed to the Proxia Empire afterwards, but the main purpose of abducting them had been to use them as hostages against Rio. It just so happened to have been Christina and Flora who were targeted, but Lucius would have been fine with anyone who had a connection to Rio. That line of thinking was giving Francois an odd feeling.

Meanwhile, Christina knew of this possibility already, but the guilt she felt for her former actions towards Rio made her purposefully divert the topic. "If the Proxia Empire hired Lucius's group of mercenaries, then that would be in order to discard them after they completed the abduction," she said.

"Indeed. It's a typical method used to deny one's involvement in various misdoings. I agree in regards to that point, but…Lucius's information management seemed a little too poor for that. He sought cooperation from Prince Duran, who ended up revealing his location to Haruto. Haruto then arrived where the two princesses were. It's almost as though he set things up to happen this way… Perhaps it *was* a setup?" Francois drew close to the heart of the matter, but he didn't look entirely convinced about something.

"It is as you say. Lucius may have directed Prince Duran to inform me of his location in order for us to duel. The reason why Proxia's motive is unclear is probably—no, it's most certainly because of the existing connection between Lucius and myself," Rio explained. He had asked Christina to hide this information beforehand, knowing that it could complicate matters. But now that things had come to this, he decided it would be better to bring it out into the open.

Meanwhile, Christina reacted to Rio's words by pursing her lips in vexation.

"I had the same thought, but that wouldn't make sense if Lucius didn't know you were coming to Paladia beforehand, right? Unless Lucius witnessed you participating in Prince Duran's event and decided to use the two princesses after…" Francois said, analyzing the situation with a doubtful expression.

"Wait, what are you saying? That Lucius bastard kidnapped Christina and Flora to use them as hostages to draw out Haruto? That means… Whoa, isn't that pretty damn serious?"

Hiroaki had been listening to the discussion with a disinterested look until now, but he suddenly interrupted in a strangely lively voice. His expression had also perked up in interest.

"What's so serious about it?" Christina asked with a sigh.

"Huh? Isn't it obvious? It means you two were targeted because of this bastard here. That's a grave matter," Hiroaki said, pointing at Rio.

"You're wrong," Christina stated flatly.

"What? Why?"

"I believe we would have been abducted even if we didn't have any connections to Sir Amakawa. In fact, Flora was once kidnapped in Amande before she was acquainted with Sir Amakawa, and I was also targeted by Reiss and Lucius's subordinates on the way from Cleia to Rodania."

Unconvinced, Hiroaki argued back. "Hold on. How can you be so sure Flora's abduction in Amande had nothing to do with Lucius's beef with Haruto? What if this bastard was the reason she was kidnapped back then as well?"

"I cannot think of any reason why Flora would be used as a hostage against Sir Amakawa." Christina stood her ground without fearing Hiroaki's position as hero.

"Hmm? That's… Lucius had a personal grudge against the Beltrum Kingdom, right? If he kidnapped Flora because

of that, he may have tried to use her as a hostage out of a similar grudge towards Haruto as well…" Hiroaki seemed to realize his reasoning was weak as he voiced it out loud, losing confidence and trailing off at the end.

"With all due respect, I believe that would be impossible once you factor in the situation back then," Liselotte added to the conversation, denying Hiroaki's thoughts.

Hiroaki paused for a long moment, then quietly turned to Liselotte and grumbled. "How come?" He didn't like how she had interrupted just to defend Rio—especially when he wanted to avoid talking to her at all.

"It was a coincidence that Sir Haruto encountered Lucius back then," Liselotte answered in her usual calm voice.

So she calls me "hero," but this guy by his name.

It wasn't particularly related to his suspicions towards Haruto, but Hiroaki thought that to himself anyway. The way Liselotte would call Haruto's name at every opportunity had bothered him before, but now that she had rejected him, it was even more annoying to listen to.

"He could have just been lying about encountering Lucius by coincidence, though." Hiroaki's suspicion towards Rio didn't end there. It was clear to everyone watching that he was being emotional and arguing based on his own conclusion.

"Princess Flora was present at the scene and testified that their conversation sounded like they hadn't met in a while, so I doubt that…" It was impossible; suspecting that would mean accusing Flora of lying as well. Liselotte didn't say that out loud, but she implied it with a glance at Flora as she spoke.

Flora immediately spoke up in defense of Liselotte's explanation. "Yes. It definitely sounded like it was the first time in a while since Sir Haruto encountered the mercenary who tried to kidnap me. The other side wasn't able to recall Sir Haruto right away, so there's no mistaking it."

The heck? Everyone keeps trying to stand up for this

bastard… Now that I think about it, Flora keeps calling this guy "Sir Haruto" as well.

Flora had addressed Haruto in this way for a while now, but Hiroaki was more irritated by it now than he had ever been before. He wanted to stop the way they kept protecting him, but he didn't have any material to argue with.

"Hmph. Fine, I guess. If you all insist." Hiroaki finally backed down.

Francois, who had been watching quietly for a while, spoke up to give his opinion. "I too find it doubtful that Lucius would kidnap Princess Christina and Princess Flora only for the sake of his grudge against Haruto. It would be more reasonable to presume the Proxia Empire's motives were included in the abduction."

That being said, if this were true, the reason why Paladia was chosen as the teleport destination remains unclear… It'd be unproductive to discuss hypotheticals any further, so Francois chose not to state that out loud.

"Lucius held intense resentment for Haruto after the encounter in Amande. Is that correct?" Francois asked.

"He managed to flee after we were interrupted, but he was gravely wounded in Amande. That was most likely the reason," Rio said.

"In that case, it all makes sense. Both the mercenary and his employer had motives invested in this. That's why Princess Christina and Princess Flora were used as hostages. That must be it. Lucius already knew the two of them had some form of acquaintance with Haruto."

"Yes. So without Sir Amakawa, Flora and I wouldn't be here. We would have been imprisoned in the Proxia Castle right about now," Christina said in summary of Francois's understanding.

"Without a doubt."

"It's thanks to the connection between Lucius and Sir Hiroaki that Flora and I were spared from further disaster. I can't express my gratitude towards Sir Amakawa enough.

When I already owe him more than I could ever return…” Christina said, a hint of a somber look on her face.

“Curious how he manages to appear at the most convenient moment every single time. It almost makes me wonder if he’s the one behind it all.”

Hiroaki decided to pick fault with the story and cast suspicion on Rio. His comment completely missed the mood of the room, making Roanna sweat nervously beside him.

“Sir Hiroaki,” Christina said with a sigh.

“Wh-What?”

“In order to protect us, Sir Amakawa was cornered in an extremely unfavorable position. I know this because I witnessed it myself, right up close. He was treading the line of life and death, yet he devoted himself to saving us.”

“So what?”

“So please refrain from making such rude remarks about him. I cannot overlook such comments, even if they come from the hero,” Christina stated firmly, fixing a critical stare at Hiroaki.

With no basis for his words, even Hiroaki knew he was being outright rude to Rio right now. He looked like he wanted to argue with Christina, but he ended up averting his gaze with a guilty look. “Fine. My bad. I’m not feeling well, so I’m gonna leave first.”

He swallowed down his protests and shot up to his feet.

“Go with Sir Hiroaki, Roanna,” Christina immediately ordered. Hiroaki was already walking towards the door.

“R-Right away.” Roanna got to her feet in a hurry, bowed, then left after Hiroaki.

“Damn it all.” There was no one around to hear Hiroaki’s muttering as he left by himself first. He had marched out of the door without so much as a glance back.

Roanna followed after him, and the door swung shut.

“I apologize for Sir Hiroaki’s impoliteness, Sir Amakawa,” Christina said with a rather regretful, pained look.

“There’s no reason for you to apologize,” Rio replied with a concerned smile.

“Just before the three of you arrived, the marriage discussion between Hiroaki and Liselotte was called off. That may be the reason for his bad mood,” Francois summarized with a light shrug.

“Sir Hiroaki and Lady Liselotte… I understand. No wonder everyone was gathered here.” Christina pressed a hand to her forehead as though she was holding back the onset of a headache.

“I am sorry,” Liselotte said, bowing her head awkwardly.

“It’s not something for you to apologize for either. In fact, I can imagine Sir Hiroaki was rather unreasonable about it. I’m sorry for all the trouble we’ve caused.” The look of fatigue in Christina’s expression only intensified.

Liselotte shook her head humbly. “Oh no, not at all.”

“At any rate, Princess Christina and Princess Flora have returned. Thanks to that, all of our immediate issues have been resolved. Let’s think of this in a positive way,” Francois said to the two of them.

“Okay.” Christina and Liselotte nodded together.

“The Proxia Empire backing Rubia’s betrayal is troubling, but is there anything else that needs attention?”

“That’s pretty much all the information we have… But if the Proxia Empire has someone who can freely use teleportation, it’d be quite the predicament,” Christina said.

“Hmm. Lost ancient sorcery that allows the manipulation of space. I’ve heard of its existence, but I’ve never witnessed it with my own eyes. I’d like to think it’s not easy to use, but…” Liselotte trailed off.

“We should be prepared for the worst-case scenario. I don’t know how freely they can control the teleport destination, but it’d be dangerous if they set it to their castle.”

“Indeed it would… For example, the banquet where we formally introduced Lady Satsuki to the public. We never

ended up deducing the infiltration route the insurgents used, but if the Proxia Empire was involved in that raid, the incident can be explained through the use of teleportation," Francois said.

"If that's true, then it's a terrifying thought." Liselotte's father, Cedric Cretia, uttered his sentiments after actively avoiding participation in the conversation until now.

"It is indeed..." Duke Huguenot imagined the use of teleportation in an attack on Rodania and agreed with sympathy in his voice.

Back then, I couldn't detect any disturbance in magic essence from the use of teleport sorcery, Rio recalled. *Any essence-detecting artifact would have picked up on it, and even people who can't visualize essence can detect the disturbance after teleport is activated, if they have sharp senses. But... With an essence-blocking barrier, it might be possible to suppress the disturbance of ode and mana caused by teleport sorcery.*

Amidst everyone else's uneasiness, he used his familiarity with teleport sorcery to analyze whether teleport had been used.

"It'd also be most worrying if they could teleport directly into the room of someone important. Just the thought of that possibility gives me the chills," Francois hummed with a grim look. The others must have imagined someone teleporting into their bedrooms as well, as their expressions were rather peaky.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Rio said to dispel their woes.

"Oh? And why is that?" Francois asked.

"In order to teleport with sorcery, the coordinates of the destination must be set in advance, so you cannot teleport anywhere you haven't been before. It's most likely done with a pair of artifacts—one to teleport the target and one to set the destination. If they wanted to teleport into the room of an important figure, they'd need to sneak into that room in

advance to set the coordinates. Considering the difficulty of doing that, it's more likely that they'll choose an easier location to access."

Francois's eyes widened. "You're oddly knowledgeable about this…" he commented in wonder.

"I heard about it from my benefactor, Lady Celia of Count Claire's house. She said that it was described like this in ancient literature."

The residents of the spirit folk village could use teleport, and Rio himself possessed artifacts with teleport sorcery embedded in them, but he naturally couldn't tell them that here. That's why he brought up Celia's name to brush off answering.

Sorry, Celia.

"Celia Claire, the young sorcerer from Beltrum said to be a genius, you say? Then the information must be reliable." When it came to the field of sorcery, Celia's name was extremely persuasive. Francois hummed in awe.

"If the Proxia Empire was involved in the raid on the banquet, and if teleport sorcery was used for it, then someone in attendance may have collaborated with them to set the coordinates. If someone was there, it would be easy to set the coordinates to within the castle. For example…"

"Someone from the Rubia Kingdom, you think?" Francois considered the strong possibility of the Proxia Empire's involvement and immediately suspected the Rubia Kingdom, seeing that they'd just betrayed them.

"Yes," Rio nodded slowly.

"Indeed, if the Rubia Kingdom betrayed us as early as back then, things would make sense," Francois said coldly, his anger intensifying. If the Proxia Empire possessed magic artifacts with teleport sorcery, Lucius using the same method made sense.

"If you are concerned that the artifact used to set the destination coordinates is still within the castle grounds, you should do a thorough investigation for any suspicious

essence reactions. An artifact being used to set coordinates should emit a certain amount of magic essence."

Though few in number, sorcerers that could use *Zona Revelare*—area search magic—could conduct the investigation, as could the similarly few artifacts capable of detecting essence reactions.

"I see. This has been a truly constructive discussion. There are artifacts capable of detecting suspicious essence in certain parts of the castle, but they only cover an extremely limited area. It's a good chance there are artifacts there. Once we're done here, I will have a search of the castle conducted and reevaluate the security." Francois smiled, pleased to know that his fears of sudden invasion could be addressed.

"For reference, the magic artifact that teleported Flora and myself to Paladia was in the form of a crystal. But it's possible the one set at the destination is in a different form," Christina offered.

"I understand. Thank you for that information," Francois said, nodding.

I should conduct a search around Amande as well. Maybe I should send someone back first to arrange that, Liselotte thought to herself. This information alone had been worth her trip here. In fact, at this moment, everyone in the room resolved themselves to thoroughly check their surroundings.

"Now then, I believe all that remains is to consider countermeasures against the forced teleportation that the princesses went through," Francois said, moving on to the next topic.

"It's likely that only a very small number of people can be teleported at once. Either the activation spell is chanted before the crystal is thrown at the target, or the caster teleports themselves while within a certain range of the person they want to drag along. If we take into account the time between chanting and spell activation, there should be

a way of handling it if you react in time, but it may be quite difficult…" Christina explained, giving an accurate analysis based on when the teleport crystal was used on herself.

"So you either distance yourself from the caster before they finish chanting, or you repel the crystal they throw back at them. It's better than not knowing anything at all, I suppose. I shall pass that on to the security guards."

"Yes. I pray that this kind of situation never happens again… The Restoration will also re-examine our security."

"Indeed. I suppose that's all there was to address for now… Now that we've exchanged all the necessary information, let's talk about Haruto next," Francois said, looking at Rio.

"Me?" Rio's eyes widened at the sudden spotlight, and he tilted his head awkwardly.

"Yes. We need to discuss your reward."

"I don't require anything in particular…" Receiving things would only be a problem, so Rio tried declining respectfully. However…

"I will not allow it. Spare me your jests," Francois said, bluntly shooting him down.

"I'm being serious…"

"What's troubling is that in your case, you decline because of the bother rather than a lack of wants. Do you intend on retiring as a hermit at such a young age?" Francois lamented, pressing a hand to his forehead in worry.

"I'd prefer to live a quiet and peaceful life, if possible," Rio admitted with a wry smile.

"As when I appointed you as Honorary Knight, it is my duty as king to properly reward your distinguished services. There will be no future for the kingdom if such meritorious deeds are not given proper recognition. Achievements must be rewarded in order. Failure to do so will only result in the best people leaving for greener pastures."

"Of course, I am aware of that…"

It was a simple matter. By creating a custom where those

who made achievements could expect to be appropriately recognized, the people serving the kingdom would work frantically to achieve greater heights. There weren't many people who would work themselves to the bone for a nation that didn't value them. A performance-based doctrine would create antagonism between those competing for recognition, but that could be managed with a properly established system.

A harsh truth for our kingdom, that not only failed to value him appropriately, but even charged him with a false accusation… Christina grimaced with bitter regret.

"So, accept your reward. The safe return of Princess Christina and Princess Flora is of immense benefit to Galarc as well. It's more than enough cause for a reward. In fact, you are also owed a reward for escorting Princess Christina from Cleia to Rodania. You haven't visited the castle since the banquet, so the incident is still unsettled." Francois fixed his gaze on him.

"I am much obliged."

"And so, I will be using this opportunity to reward you for everything—do be prepared."

"Understood…" Rio nodded, head drooping.

Charlotte joined the conversation with a giggle. "Hee hee, Sir Haruto is so funny. You're not meant to react to a reward with disappointment. But as father said, you don't visit the castle often enough. That is unacceptable," she protested, puffing up her cheeks at Rio with a sulking look.

"My apologies. I was traveling around from place to place," Rio replied, shrinking back.

"Yet you had a meal with Lady Satsuki and Liselotte?" Charlotte immediately pointed out, causing Rio to struggle for words.

"That's…"

"Stop tormenting him, Charlotte. We're discussing the matter of rewards right now," Francois said, intervening.

"I understand. We can leave this topic for later, when we

can go over it in detail." Charlotte immediately backed down, shooting a suggestive and bewitching smile at Rio.

"…"

Rio looked at Satsuki for help but was met with a shrug of resignation.

"The Restoration would also like to reward you," Christina said apologetically, having sensed Rio's predicament.

"I have already received an estate in Rodania from the Restoration, so I would not feel comfortable accepting anything further…"

Of course, that wasn't acceptable.

"I've witnessed the making of many commendable feats from my position, but none have been as notable as yours, Haruto. Your many achievements have saved the Restoration time and time again. If we do not reward you for it, we risk the spread of negative rumors. Please accept our gratitude as well," Duke Huguenot said cheerfully on Christina's behalf, who wasn't as persuasive.

"I understand…" Rio agreed reluctantly.

"Speaking of which, you have a mansion in Rodania?"

"Yes. I received one the other day."

"Hmm. It'd be odd for you to have a place in Rodania, but not in Galarc. I shall give you one of the royal family's mansions within the castle grounds," Francois declared.

"…"

Christina, Liselotte, Duke Cretia and his wife, and Duke Huguenot—all seasoned members of the noble class and above—all looked clearly shocked, which was a rare expression on them. Only Charlotte was left smiling triumphantly.

"A mansion within the castle grounds? I don't believe I've ever seen any nobles living within the grounds…" Rio said, looking at the others.

"Of course not. The castle and its land belong to the royal family, after all. While guests may stay at the castle, long-

term residence of those outside of royalty is not permitted. Not even Cedric—Duke Cretia, the leading noble of this kingdom—has an estate on the castle grounds. Duke Huguenot's mansion in the Beltrum capital would have been outside of the castle grounds too," Francois said, looking at Duke Cretia and Duke Huguenot.

Incidentally, many of the influential nobles who served as lords of territories loaned from the kingdom wanted to assume important positions within the royal castle. In fact, it was *because* they were influential that they wanted to do so. This was because in centralized nations such as Galarc or the Beltrum Kingdom, participation in the kingdom's governance could only be done from the center—that is, the royal castle.

Thus, it was customary for nobles to have secondary homes in the noble district of the capital, separate from their main residence in their territory. The distance of the mansion to the castle and the extravagance of the estate also became a status symbol for those working in the castle. It was common for the head of a family to leave their territory's management to an heir and spend most of the year in the capital to work at the castle.

"In that case, I believe it should be impossible for me to possess a mansion within the castle grounds when I'm not even a duke…" Rio said hesitantly, probing for Francois's true intentions.

"That's because this is a one-of-a-kind privilege unavailable to the other nobles of the kingdom. I'm sure many would be flabbergasted to hear about this," Francois said, grinning.

"That's a little too much… Wouldn't a mansion outside of the castle suffice? There shouldn't be any reason for it to be within the castle grounds…"

The king himself was basically declaring his favoritism for Rio over other nobles—an action that would only attract unwanted attention. Thus, Rio wished to decline the offer.

“Oh, I figured it’d be easier for Lady Satsuki to come and go freely if it were within the castle grounds. The procedure to leave the castle can be quite troublesome, so it would remove that hassle completely. Lady Miharu can also stay for as long as she pleases the next time she visits the castle. Isn’t it a wonderful idea?”

“That certainly would be convenient…” Satsuki mumbled.

Francois smiled at that. “There’s no need to worry about the backlash from the nobles either. They’ll have no choice but to hold their tongues once they hear about your list of achievements. If we consider it a reward for both escorting Princess Christina to Rodania and the incident this time, it seems reasonable. Wouldn’t you agree, Cedric?”

“Indeed, they would fall silent… But envious people will also appear. The nobles working in the royal court in particular may feel discontent. Such people would form cliques to spread malicious gossip. Wouldn’t it be better for Haruto to avoid creating enemies in the royal court?” Duke Cretia gave his honest opinion with Rio in mind.

“Those who envy his achievements will appear no matter what, but we may be able to do something to decrease those numbers. It’s the same as the usual power struggle that goes on in the castle—it all boils down to who you ally with.”

“I completely agree…”

“With myself, Cedric, and Lady Satsuki ironclad on Haruto’s side, most people will be silenced in fright. All that’s left is to give it a final push. If I move myself, it’ll be a clear act of pressure… You understand?”

Make sure you pull the strings in your own faction to get a good word in—that was what Francois was implicitly ordering Cedric to do. In other words, he had to increase the number of Haruto’s allies in the royal court—an incredibly vital task.

“As I thought…” Cedric nearly hung his head.

“I’m leaving it to you. Understand?”

Cedric immediately found his resolve and nodded respectfully. “Yes, Your Majesty. I owe Haruto for saving my daughter in Amande, so I shall get on it right away.”

“So there you have it, Haruto.”

“I’m not sure I wanted to learn all that…” Rio’s face twitched faintly at the compacted display of a vertically structured society.

“I grant you a mansion on the royal castle grounds. This is officially decided as of now.”

“I gratefully accept…” Rio bowed his head lightly at Francois’s smiling declaration.

“Even the unused mansions are regularly maintained, so it should be possible to hand it over immediately. You may need permanent servants for the mansion, but… The staff selection must be meticulous, to prevent anyone suspicious from slipping in. If you wish to do this yourself, that can also be arranged,” Christina explained.

“What will you do?” Francois said to Rio.

“I don’t believe there’s any need to hire permanent servants. I can look after myself, and I’m not used to living together with servants anyway.”

“I see… Let me know if you change your mind. We can also prepare temporary staff on our end for your needs,” said Francois.

“I am very thankful for your consideration.”

“That will be all for the reward from our kingdom. What will the Restoration do?” Francois asked Christina.

“The Restoration will require a little more time to decide what to reward Sir Amakawa with. We need to spend more time considering what we can offer that will be worthy of Sir Amakawa’s services.”

“I see. Is that fine with you, Haruto?”

“Of course,” Rio nodded.

“Then let’s call it a day here. There are various things I need to discuss with Cedric. If you wish to continue amongst yourselves, feel welcome to,” Francois said, expressing his

intention to leave.

“Lady Satsuki and I can take over entertaining Sir Haruto from here,” Charlotte immediately suggested.

“I would be honored.” Rio nodded readily.

Francois paused just before he left and asked, “Speaking of which, what are your plans now, Haruto?”

“I’d like to visit Lady Celia, so I’m thinking of going back to Rodania with Princess Christina and the others. I also have to return to Miharu and our other housemates…”

If he was receiving a mansion, that would probably have to wait for later. However, Rio personally wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Flora and I have to show ourselves to the organization to reassure the others of our safety, so we were thinking of leaving as early as tomorrow…” Christina explained.

“Huh? You only just got here and you’re going to leave already?” Charlotte expressed her displeasure with a sullen pout. Then she clapped her hands together, as though she just came up with a brilliant idea. “I know! You can bring everyone to the castle. Since you have your own mansion here now.”

Rio was taken aback by the suggestion, but hummed after hesitating for a moment. “Many of them are unfamiliar with noble society, so bringing them here is a bit…”

Celia and Aishia were living in Rodania, while Miharu, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were living in the outskirts. If he invited them all to the castle, the only ones who would accept for sure would be Celia and Miharu.

I haven’t spent much time with everyone in the stone house—especially Latifa—since we came to the Strahl region, so I want to stay with them for a while.

He didn’t like the thought of separating everyone after coming this far either.

“But Lady Satsuki must want to see Lady Miharu again too, and wouldn’t Lady Miharu want to see Lady Satsuki as well?” Charlotte asked.

“Well, I’d love to do that if possible, but…” Satsuki agreed, but she didn’t demand anything out of consideration for Rio’s circumstances.

“If it’s merely a matter of being unfamiliar with noble society, don’t worry. They can just stay within Sir Haruto’s mansion. Father may want to meet them, but I can use my authority to refuse all other meetings with anyone else.”

It seemed that Charlotte was fully prepared to use her authority in order to entice Rio. Rio had a somewhat wry smile at that realization.

I want to let Miharu and Satsuki meet up as well. If we can keep Latifa’s contact with the others in this castle to a bare minimum, then perhaps it may be worth inviting them anyway.

“Fine. I cannot promise I’ll bring them for sure, but I’ll ask everyone what they think.”

“I will eagerly await their reply,” Charlotte said joyfully, her movements full of charm.

“Hmm. If you’re leaving tomorrow, it would be best to hand over the mansion today. Charlotte, you know the empty mansion beside the tower Lady Satsuki is residing in?” Francois asked.

“Yes, father. Is that the mansion you’re granting to Sir Haruto?”

“Indeed. You can show Haruto the way with Lady Satsuki. The key is in my office, so come with me.”

“I understand. I’ll be back soon, so please wait here, Lady Satsuki, Sir Haruto. Liselotte, you stay here too. Come with us to see Sir Haruto’s mansion later.”

“Yup, okay,” Satsuki said.

“If it isn’t a bother, then gladly,” Charlotte added.

“Also, since father has things to discuss with Duke Cretia, would you like to join us on the tour, Lady Julianne?” Charlotte asked, inviting Liselotte’s mother along.

As a duchess, Julianne was of a lower status than the royal Charlotte, but Charlotte spoke to her with respect

considering their age difference.

“I would be delighted to, if it’s not a problem for anyone else.”

“You’re more than welcome to come along. Isn’t that right, Sir Haruto?”

“Of course,” Rio replied immediately. He wouldn’t have been able to decline due to his position, but he’d spoken to Julianne when he was last here for the banquet and wanted to thank her once again for that, so he had no reason to refuse.

“Then it’s decided.” Charlotte smiled happily. Thus, it was decided that the Galarc side of the room would head with Rio to see his new mansion.

Meanwhile, having constantly been with Rio for some time now, Flora watched them all with a somewhat lonely, envious look.

Charlotte seemed to notice Flora's expression. "Would you like to come along, Princess Christina, Princess Flora? I would love to hear more about what happened on your journey with Sir Haruto."

"We…"

What should they do? Was it okay to go? Out of consideration for Rio, Christina trailed off, leaving a slight pause. She looked at Flora beside her, who had a very eager expression on her face.

"Since you've offered, we will go too," Christina replied humbly.

"In that case, I shall prepare a change of clothes for you two, so please follow me. We can't have you dressed in that travel attire forever."

Christina and Flora had been led to this room directly after their journey, so Charlotte made a proposal out of consideration for them.

"Thank you very much," Christina said first. Flora echoed her words.

"I'll have Sir Haruto's clothing brought to the mansion for you to change once we arrive."

"I'd appreciate that."

Rio was similarly in his travel clothes. He had a change of clothes in the Time-Space Cache, but Charlotte was unaware of its existence. However, Rio didn't have many clothes suitable for a noble to wear, so he was grateful for the consideration.

"Such is the plan. We'll find you later, Duke Huguenot," Christina said.

"Understood. I will go check on Sir Hiroaki, then."

Duke Huguenot bowed his head smoothly.

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After their discussion, King Francois, Second Princess Charlotte, Duke Cretia, Christina, Flora, and Duke Huguenot exited the room, leaving Rio, Satsuki, Liselotte, and Julianne behind. They were to wait until Christina and Flora finished changing. Charlotte soon returned with the key to Rio's mansion.

"I haven't spoken to you since the night of the banquet. Since I haven't given a proper greeting yet, I'd like to do that now. It's nice to see you again," Satsuki said to Julianne. She had exchanged greetings with countless nobles at the banquet, but she clearly remembered Liselotte's mother.

Julianne smiled at Satsuki. "Yes. It's an honor to be remembered by the great hero."

"Why, that's because you are so beautiful. As expected of Liselotte's mother… In fact, I first thought you two were sisters with a slight age gap, so I was shocked when I heard you were actually parent and child. That really left an impression."

"Why, I'm so flattered to hear that the great hero thinks that of me." Julianne blushed shyly.

"I'm not really accustomed to being referred to as 'hero.' Please call me by my name."

"Then, if you do not mind… Lady Satsuki. Thank you for getting along with my daughter," Julianne said, tipping her head.

"No no, I should be saying that—Liselotte's looked after me so much," Satsuki replied sociably, returning the bow.

"Her work as a governor and head of a trading company has caused her to neglect interaction with her peers, so I am most appreciative of you becoming her friend," Julianna said, showing a glimpse of her parental affection.

Liselotte had a faint blush on her face. "Isn't that enough, mother?"

"Hee hee. Don't worry about that. Liselotte and I have become great friends. She always visits me when she comes to the capital for business. Thank you, Liselotte." Satsuki

giggled, expressing her appreciation.

"Not at all. Talking with you also makes me happy, so I should be the one thanking you."

Seeing her beloved daughter's bashful reply, Julianne addressed her gently. "How wonderful, Liselotte."

"Yes, mother," Liselotte agreed in an energetic voice.

"Please forgive my delayed greeting. Thank you for your help the last time we met, Lady Julianne. Lady Liselotte as well." Rio joined the conversation, greeting Julianne and Liselotte. Since they were in front of the king earlier, all their greetings had been abridged.

"The pleasure was mine. It's been a while, Sir Haruto," Liselotte replied first.

"It's a joy to be able to speak to you again properly, Sir Amakawa. Thank you for inviting me to see your mansion along with Lady Satsuki and my daughter," Julianne responded, smiling in true delight.

"Don't mention it. My journey has left me with little time to meet with everyone, so I'm glad we've been blessed with this opportunity to chat. I wanted to thank you once again."

"It'd be nice if you showed your face around here more often now that you've got a mansion," Satsuki playfully requested.

"I intend on doing so in the future. You can think of it as your own home and come and go freely while I'm here."

"You've said it now. I'm looking forward to it." Satsuki beamed, fully intending on taking him up on his word.

"Yes," Rio said, nodding with a welcoming smile.

"It's decided! Now I'm even more curious to see what your new mansion will look like. Thanks, Haruto."

"I've done nothing worth thanking me for."

"That's not true. Your distinguished service is what prompted this mansion as a reward, so if you hadn't returned safely with Princess Christina and Princess Flora, I wouldn't have something to look forward to this much. They're ordinary words, but it doesn't feel right not to say

them… So, thanks. I'll take you up on your kind offer and visit you every day you're here," Satsuki said, dispelling the gloomy atmosphere with an impish giggle at the end of her words.

"I see," Rio said, chuckling.

"Do either of you know what kind of mansion he's going to get?" Satsuki asked the two members of the Cretia family.

"I know which building His Majesty was referring to. It's a very beautiful mansion, fit for royal inhabitants. It was also constructed recently, so it's a modern and stylish design. However, its location is normally restricted to royalty, so its interior design is a mystery to me… Would you know, mother?" Liselotte answered first, then turned to Julianne.

"I haven't been inside either, so I'm brimming with curiosity as well," Julianne said, exuding delight.

"I feel the same way. Seeing the layout and interior design of other homes is so exciting."

Thus, their animated conversation continued until Charlotte returned half an hour later with Christina and Flora in their fresh sets of clothes.

Chapter 2: New Place, New Ripples?

Roughly half an hour later, the group had relocated from the drawing room to the grounds of the castle. Charlotte led the way to the mansion Francois had bestowed onto Rio, and they were accompanied by Satsuki, Liselotte, Julianne, and a freshly changed Christina and Flora.

“This is the mansion that Sir Haruto was given,” Charlotte said, coming to a stop in front of the building to point it out.

“It’s a stone’s throw away from the tower I’m living in. I figured it was within eyeshot of my room, but I wasn’t sure exactly where. It looks even better up close, though.”

Satsuki turned around to look up at the tower she lived in. There were fewer than one hundred meters between the two buildings.

“Let’s go inside. It has some basic furnishings and was restocked with supplies while you were all waiting, so you can move in right away. I’ll give you a brief tour of all the rooms, and then we can have a chat in the drawing room. Come this way.”

Charlotte resumed leading the way. Several of her attendants were waiting before the mansion, bowing their heads silently. One of them looked up and walked over to the entrance to open the door.

The party proceeded to enter the mansion. They first went through every room, allowing Rio to change his clothes along the way, then finally moved to the drawing room to sit down on the sofa there.

The seating was based on Charlotte’s casual lead—

Liselotte and Julianne sat in the lower seats closest to the door, with the others diagonally on either side of them in a U-shape. Rio was sandwiched between Satsuki and Charlotte, while Christina and Flora sat across from them.

“As expected of a royal mansion… It’s wonderful. There’s so much space, and there are so many rooms,” Satsuki said, impressed by the tour she’d just experienced.

“I still have my doubts about living here when I’m not royalty…” Rio muttered, giving his thoughts once again now that he had seen the mansion.

“Yeah, being the only one exempted to live on the castle grounds does kind of stand out,” Satsuki said, smiling wryly out of sympathy for Rio.

But Charlotte immediately beamed. “If the king that reigns over all royalty has allowed it, then there isn’t a problem at all. I too would love to have you live in this mansion, so I’ll support you to the best of my ability.”

“Aha ha…” Satsuki laughed dryly. “There’s one thing I’ve been wondering. What is defined as ‘royalty’? I know Char is a royal, and so are Princess Christina and Princess Flora, but how far down the bloodline can you go before the relatives are no longer considered royalty? It’s never been made clear to me, so I thought there were lots of royals.”

“That’s actually explained in detail in the Royal House Law. Every child born between the current king and his first wife that hasn’t renounced their royal status is considered royal—this is the same for every kingdom. It’s also common to include the previous king and his first wife, as well as the children between them. Apart from that, it tends to vary from kingdom to kingdom,” Charlotte explained, recalling the facts from her memory. She then turned to the other princess in the room. “Is that how it works in the Beltrum Kingdom, Princess Christina?”

Christina nodded and spoke with a calm tone. “Yes, the same applies there.”

“In other words, regardless of their current or former

post, whoever has a history of being the king and queen is considered royal for their entire lives. And their children will also keep being royals as long as they don't renounce their status," Satsuki said, summarizing the explanation to make it easier to understand.

"Yes, exactly. Renunciation is the complete withdrawal from the royal family. There are special exceptions when a foreign royal family is involved, but in most cases, marrying into the family of a vassal means taking on their status instead. It's quite common for royals to marry into the duke families of the kingdom. In fact, a royal has married into the Cretia house in the past," Liselotte continued, looking at Satsuki.

"Hmm... So you're not royalty, but a relative to royalty. I see, I see."

"Indeed."

"Come to think of it, I don't see any royals outside of the king's direct descendents in the castle very often. I have greeted them before, though."

"It isn't desirable for other royals to involve themselves in politics, as it can potentially cause the decentralization of power. That's why the only ones allowed to live inside the castle are father, mother, and us children—Michel, Rosalie, and myself. Everyone else lives in mansions within the castle grounds."

"If you don't mind me asking out of curiosity, is the reason a royal would marry a vassal and renounce their status also politically motivated?" Satsuki looked at Charlotte.

"Yes, it is. Most are made under the pretense of strengthening the royal family's bond with a particular vassal. Since the difference in status always ends up hindering things, it's common to marry into the vassal's family, as I said before," Charlotte explained, sending a quick, flirtatious glance at Rio before giggling.

"Hmm... I see..." Satsuki also glanced at Rio and nodded

in understanding.

“At any rate, renunciation mostly applies to royals of low succession rank, so for those with high ranks like Princess Christina, Princess Flora, and myself, it’s not a matter of concern,” Charlotte added.

“Mm… But isn’t it difficult to find a marriage partner without renouncing your status? Will high-ranked royals end up single for their whole lives?”

“That won’t happen. For the high-ranked royals, it’s common to let the children of their vassals marry into the royal family instead. But it’s mostly the duke families that do so.”

“Ah, so they can marry while maintaining their royal status. I see.”

“It isn’t always the case, but it’s seen as disgraceful for a high-ranked royal to renounce their royal status. Even if they don’t admit it out loud, there are royals who wish to keep their status for their entire lives.”

In other words, there was a hierarchy within royalty, and whether one was renounced depended on that ranking—and high-ranked royals abhorred the idea of renouncing their status.

“I think I get it now… Royal marriage sure is complicated, huh?” Satsuki’s face twitched faintly as she processed all the information she’d just received.

“Indeed it is,” Charlotte sighed tiredly, but with strong agreement. She then turned to Rio next to her and smiled gracefully. “But if it was for Sir Haruto, I would happily renounce my royal status.”

Rio had just brought his cup to his mouth when those words took him by surprise, causing him to choke. “A-Ahem… Pardon me,” he said as soon as he recovered, still flustered.

But everyone else present was frozen in disbelief at Charlotte’s statement, so his words never reached them.

The first one to speak among them was Satsuki. “H-Hey

now, Char. You shouldn't say that in front of Princess Christina and Princess Flora, yeah?" she warned her.

"That's not necessarily true. The situation has changed from the time when Sir Haruto left the castle after the banquet ended."

"What do you mean…?" Satsuki asked, watching Charlotte carefully for any change in expression. She recalled the bomb that was dropped after Rio left the castle.

It's true that I considered him to be an older brother, but it turns out I was mistaken. It seems I've started to harbor a liking for Sir Haruto personally, Satsuki thought.

"I'm saying that it's all thanks to Sir Haruto. Hee hee. We weren't able to meet for a while, but you didn't forget about me, right?" Charlotte evaded Satsuki's question and spoke to Rio directly.

"No, of course not…" Rio replied awkwardly under her gaze, clearly remembering what had happened at the time.

"I'm so pleased." Charlotte was delighted, beaming in a carefree and innocent way.

Meanwhile, Liselotte watched her as though she was seeing something truly curious. As a duke's daughter, Liselotte had known Charlotte from a young age, and since Charlotte had also taken a liking to her, they'd ended up becoming good friends. They knew each other well.

It wasn't rare for Charlotte to show interest in the opposite sex, but it was normally for the purpose of teasing them. She had never been serious about it. In other words, teasing the opposite sex and enjoying their reactions was one of her few hobbies—and an extremely troublesome one, at that. That had been the case until now, but…

This expression… Is Princess Charlotte serious?

It seemed like this time was different; the look on Charlotte's face was like nothing Liselotte had ever seen before. And as far as Liselotte knew, Charlotte had never made any direct statements to signify a special liking in the opposite sex. She merely *pretended* to like them.

If she would happily renounce her royal status for him, that means… She wants to marry him…? I-I don't know. What happened between the two of them? What does this mean? I'm so curious, but…

Liselotte was helplessly interested in Charlotte's intentions. A rare look of surprise remained on her face; Julianne saw that look from beside her and giggled.

Charlotte leaned in close to Rio, who was beside her. "And so, I wish to see you again soon. I won't stop him from going to Rodania with Princess Christina and Princess Flora, but please do what you must and persuade everyone, then return quickly. I am also very curious about this Lady Celia person who is so close to you."

"She is a part of the Restoration, so I cannot bring her with me at my own discretion… She also has work to do in Rodania right now," Rio answered, faltering.

"Then let's ask Princess Christina for permission. What do you say, Princess Christina?" Charlotte asked her on the spot. Her handling of the situation was extremely nimble—almost as though she had planned this from the moment she invited Christina along. This behavior would have been exceedingly rude depending on the status and position of those involved, but that didn't apply to her as a high-ranked royal.

Christina agreed readily without any hesitation. "That should be fine. It's almost time for a long vacation, so it won't be particularly difficult to cut short her work as a lecturer. I'm sure she'd like to spend some time with Sir Amakawa as well."

"Then, it's decided!" Charlotte rejoiced with an exceedingly sweet smile. "Lady Celia and Sir Haruto seem rather close, so I'm truly looking forward to meeting her… That's right! If Lady Miharu and any others are coming to stay, we should hold a sleepover in this mansion.".

"You all right with that, Haruto? You don't have to agree if you don't want to, okay? At this rate, Char will keep

deciding on everything," Satsuki said to Rio, sighing tiredly. She probably had to put up with this kind of pushiness on a daily basis.

"I'll decide after asking everyone what they think."

They'll also have to consider that while deciding whether to come... Rio thought, but he kept that to himself as he replied with a rather strained smile.

"Then we'll have a sleepover if they all come! It's a rare opportunity, so you should come too, Liselotte."

"Me? I have my work schedule to consider, so it might be difficult for me..." Liselotte was taken aback by the sudden offer.

"Sir Haruto is leaving for Rodania with Princess Christina and the others tomorrow, right? How long will it take for you to return to Galtuuk?"

"Let's see... We should arrive within the day if we take the enchanted airship from Galtuuk to Rodania, and I can speak to Lady Celia immediately... I'd need another one or two days to meet up with Miharu and the others, so if I can catch an airship back to Galtuuk, then perhaps a week or so?" Rio pondered, giving himself plenty of leeway. Since he was in front of others, he used a title when referring to Celia.

"You can leave your return trip to me. I'll send out the airship," Christina offered.

"Oh, are you sure? I was prepared to send one of ours to fetch him," Charlotte said.

"Yes. I intend on returning soon to speak with King Francois, so I'd be grateful if Sir Amakawa is willing to accompany me on the trip."

"I see. Then the transport will be left to the Restoration. If you're coming back with Sir Haruto, would you like to participate in the sleepover too, Princess Christina?" Charlotte said with a giggle.

"Oh, no, I..." As before, her reservation towards Rio took precedence. Christina was about to reject the invitation by reflex when she suddenly noticed Flora's expectant gaze on

her and swallowed her words.

"If Princess Christina is in attendance, then Princess Flora is more than welcome as well," Charlotte added with a glance at Flora.

Christina replied after a moment of hesitation. "I'm not sure if we'll be able to participate in a sleepover, but we could attend a tea party or dinner together."

"Wonderful! There's even more to look forward to with the two of you there. But we don't want Sir Haruto's companions to feel uncomfortable, so there'll be no formalities or any standing on ceremony—please keep that in mind," Charlotte said, showing ample consideration for Miharu and the others as well.

Things really do keep getting more grand. Is it even acceptable for unmarried princesses and noblewomen to stay in a man's house? It may be too late for me to ask now, though, Rio thought in dubious confusion.

"Oh, I'm so looking forward to it. If only the day could arrive faster." Charlotte had a truly satisfied look on her face as she lost herself in her thoughts. The event was probably happening for sure in her mind.

I guess my participation is set as well… Well, I want to let Miharu see Satsuki again, and I'll have to be there even if Latifa and the others can't come. As for the sleepover…well, I can just shut myself in my room as much as possible…

If Charlotte was the organizer for everything, then Rio's fears would probably be of no concern. Any further contemplation would only add to his worries, so he decided not to think anymore.

"How about you, Lady Julianne?" Charlotte asked.

"I'm married already, so you young people should enjoy yourselves. I'll inform my husband, so please look after my daughter," Julianne declined with a cheerful spring in her voice.

Liselotte sighed quietly. *Looks like my participation in*

all this is decided, huh? I'll have to adjust my schedule once I return to Amande.

However, there was a faint smile on her face.

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The conversation that took place in Rio's new mansion was generally friendly, but at the request of Charlotte, who wished to save the detailed discussion for the sleepover, they decided to call it a day a little over an hour later. Satsuki, Charlotte, Liselotte, and Julianne were to remain in Rio's mansion.

"Well then, Flora and I will be leaving now."

Christina and Flora prepared to leave. They had heard the story of how Liselotte's engagement talks with Hiroaki went down earlier, so they probably wanted to talk to Duke Huguenot and Hiroaki about it in further detail.

"Could you show us the way to Duke Huguenot's room," Christina asked the lady-in-waiting as soon as she left Rio's mansion. With her guards included, a total of ten odd people moved across the grounds and towards Duke Huguenot's room.

"Duke Huguenot isn't here right now. According to the guard, he's currently visiting the hero's room…"

Duke Huguenot was absent from the room the Galarc Kingdom had assigned to him. The lady-in-waiting had exchanged words with the guard beside his room to find out his location.

Christina thought for a moment before deciding to visit Hiroaki's room. "I see… Can you lead us there?" she requested.

"Understood."

The lady-in-waiting bowed her head respectfully and began showing them the way to Hiroaki's room. It was right nearby Duke Huguenot's room, so they arrived in less than a minute. Thus, Christina and Flora entered the room.

“Greetings, Princess Christina, Princess Flora.”

There were three figures inside: Hiroaki, Duke Huguenot, and Roanna. Duke Huguenot and Roanna stood up to welcome them, bowing their heads. Their expressions were slightly panicked.

“…” Hiroaki sat on the sofa with a sullen look. That was enough for Christina and Flora to presume he was in a bad mood.

“Good day, Sir Hiroaki.” Christina paid him no mind as she pinched the hem of her dress and curtseyed, greeting him calmly.

“Huh? It hasn’t been a good day for me,” Hiroaki snapped sarcastically.

“Did something happen?” Christina asked, still calm.

“No… Nothing. So you two were off having fun with that Haruto bastard, huh?” Hiroaki turned away with a huff, sulking.

“It was an invitation from Princess Charlotte, the princess of our ally kingdom that Sir Haruto, our savior, is affiliated with. We cannot treat them with disdain.”

“You say that, but you two actually wanted to be there, didn’t you?” Hiroaki muttered. However, his words failed to reach anyone’s ears.

“Did you say something?” Christina tilted her head.

Hiroaki grit his teeth. “I was in the middle of talking to Duke Huguenot and Roanna,” he began to say.

“What were you talking about?” Christina asked, seeking clarification.

“About my marriage to Rosalie.”

Christina glanced at Duke Huguenot and Roanna, who looked rather pale, then turned back to Hiroaki. “Just to confirm, this is Third Princess Rosalie of the Galarc Kingdom you’re referring to. Is that correct?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. Please let me hear the details. You may all sit down as well.”

Sensing something troublesome on the horizon, Christina prompted her party to sit down before taking a seat opposite to Hiroaki herself. Flora sat beside her, the two of them facing Hiroaki. Duke Huguenot and Roanna moved to a lower seat.

“What’s the story?” Christina asked Hiroaki once they had settled into their seats.

“There’s not much to tell. I want Rosalie as my first wife. That’s all,” Hiroaki said simply, lifting his face to watch her reaction.

“I see. Were Duke Huguenot and Roanna explaining why that would be impossible?” Christina asked in a detached tone, showing no particular surprise as she let Hiroaki stare at her.

“…Yeah.” The unexpected reaction made Hiroaki’s brow furrow faintly as he nodded.

“You originally agreed to Flora as a first wife. Is that correct? This was announced publicly.”

“But Flora disappeared with no way of knowing if she was alive. The engagement was as good as called off at that point. That’s why I was getting engaged to Rosalie to prevent the organization from falling apart,” Hiroaki replied in an overeager manner.

“You are entirely correct. However, Flora returned alive before things proceeded with the engagement, so the Galarc Kingdom would also be expecting you to return to Flora. I believe your engagement with Princess Rosalie has been called off at this point.”

“Well, how convenient for you. I’m getting fed up with having my engagement change at the drop of a hat, you know?”

A conflicted look flashed across Christina’s face before she bowed her head solemnly. “Indeed, that is most understandable. I apologize for sweeping you along at our convenience.”

“Hmph.” Hiroaki snorted, finding some satisfaction in

that response.

“There’s one thing I’d like to ask. Is the reason you feel so strongly about marrying Princess Rosalie because you love her?”

“H-Huh? Oh, not really… If anything, I’m neutral about it.” When Christina questioned him about his feelings for Rosalie, Hiroaki’s eyes darted everywhere in a show of sudden embarrassment.

“That was tactless of me. However, it is an extremely crucial point for me… I apologize for my rudeness.” Christina apologized once again.

Hiroaki looked suspicious. “Huh…?”

“Allow me to confirm one last thing. You wish for Princess Rosalie to be your first wife, not Flora. Is that correct?” Christina continued, staring at him.

“Y-Yeah. That’s what I said from the beginning.” Pressured by Christina’s gaze, Hiroaki’s answer came out in a high-pitched squeak.

“I understand. Then let’s call off your engagement to Flora,” Christina stated simply.

“Wh-What are you saying, Princess Christina?!” Duke Huguenot was unusually flustered, yelling out in confusion. Beside him, Roanna was also shocked and froze with her eyes wide open. In fact, even Hiroaki—the one who originally suggested it—was rendered speechless.

“We can’t change the facts. Sir Hiroaki wishes for Princess Rosalie to be his first wife.”

“That doesn’t mean you should agree to it so readily…! Wouldn’t Sir Hiroaki’s ties to the Restoration weaken like that?”

Are you in your right mind? Duke Huguenot implied without those exact words.

“Being married to someone you do not love would be agony for the rest of your life,” Christina answered smoothly, her tone as calm as ever. The “someone you do not love” here referred to Flora.

“B-But when you’re a royal or noble…”

“Indeed, such matters are irrelevant when you’re a royal or noble. However, Sir Hiroaki is neither royal nor noble. He’s a hero.” Christina continued Duke Huguenot’s unfinished words and argued against them.

“That’s…” Duke Huguenot fell speechless with a twitching face. If the subject had been a young noblewoman, he would have dismissed such demands with a laugh, but he couldn’t do that with the hero.

“I have no objections to marrying a complete stranger if they bring benefit to the kingdom. If I don’t love them before we marry, I will strive to do so. But that is because I’m royal —I cannot expect the same from Sir Hiroaki.”

“H-However, even then… The hero is absolutely essential to the Restoration. The best way to strengthen the ties of our organization would be…” Despite his difference in status to Christina and consideration of Hiroaki’s position, Duke Huguenot attempted to persuade her with a strained expression.

“Of course, I understand how you feel. But the heroes are not originally from this world. They merely descended here by chance through the sacred summoning stones. They were originally legends passed down through the generations. Am I wrong?”

“That is correct, but…” Duke Huguenot looked dubious, unable to see the entire picture from just that.

“The heroes originally didn’t exist. It would be wrong to force them into the framework of our organization. Do you agree?”

“Since they exist now, I don’t think it’d be wrong to consider them in our calculations…” Duke Huguenot wasn’t about to back down easily. He didn’t often press his objections towards people directly superior to him like Christina, but the hero held enough value to warrant it.

“Since they exist now, we have to consider things properly. But that doesn’t mean we can force them. The

heroes transcend us humans, so forcing them into our society will create a distortion."

Exactly like how we're being troubled by this current mess, no? Christina implied with a smile that lacked any warmth.

Duke Huguenot fell silent at that.

"I didn't exactly volunteer to become a hero either. If I could return to Earth, I would," Hiroaki mumbled quietly.

A curtain of silence had fallen over the room, so his voice resounded well.

"In that case, would you like to quit being a hero?"

Christina wanted to ask what he intended to do about his engagement to Rosalie if he was saying he wanted to go back to Earth, but she decided to ignore it and touch upon the core of the matter instead.

"It's not something I can quit even if I wanted to," Hiroaki said sullenly. Christina was so composed he couldn't allow himself to get heated.

"The Restoration receives great benefit just by having you as a member of the organization, but if being here is a burden to you, then there should be room for further consideration."

"So you're saying you don't need me in the Restoration?"

"Honestly speaking, the Restoration would be in a very bad place without you, so we would be greatly appreciative if you continued to remain with us. However, I wish to respect your opinion above all else. That is what I'm saying. These are my sincere feelings towards you, the hero, as the representative of the organization that wishes to keep you on board hereafter," Christina said, making an appeal to Hiroaki in a truly dignified manner.

Hiroaki opened his mouth to say something, but no words came out. He fell silent with a bitter look.

“You said you wish for Princess Rosalie to be your first wife, and I won’t stop you there. However, you should be aware that if you wish to marry her, you’ll have to continue being a hero. I hope you can understand that.”

Hiroaki held his tongue with a sullen look.

“Flora and I will be leaving for Rodania tomorrow. We need to reassure the Restoration of our safety, but we will return to Galarc immediately. While we’re there, the cancellation of your engagement with Flora will be formally announced.”

“What…?” Hiroaki finally reacted, lifting his head with a twitch.

“Your engagement to Princess Rosalie will remain confidential, but I’ll pass the word on to King Francois. If you truly wish to marry her, please tell her your feelings yourself,” Christina said, urging Hiroaki, who had left all the marriage talks to others until now, to make his own move.

Hiroaki winced.

“Roanna,” Christina continued, turning to give Roanna an order. “You remain in this castle and attend to Sir Hiroaki.”

Roanna paused but eventually bowed her head. “Understood.”

“What will you do, Duke Huguenot?”

Duke Huguenot hesitated for a moment. “I will accompany you back to Rodania,” he said, choosing to return to Rodania with them.

“I wish to arrive by afternoon, so we’ll depart in the morning.”

“Understood.” Duke Huguenot nodded.

“Well, then. That will be all from Flora and myself.” Christina stood up. Flora hurriedly got to her feet as well.

“I shall leave with you.” Duke Huguenot also rose immediately.

Thus, Christina, Flora, and Duke Huguenot left the room, leaving Hiroaki and Roanna behind.

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“Princess Christina, if I may have a moment?” Duke Huguenot called out to Christina as soon as he’d left the room.

“Sure. Let’s go to your room,” Christina replied, then proceeded straight to Duke Huguenot’s room nearby. Christina and Flora sat down on the sofa, facing the duke. The room was slightly smaller than Hiroaki’s.

“Is what you wish to discuss concerning Sir Hiroaki?” Christina asked first.

“Indeed. I strongly agree that there should be a limit to how far we can concede as an organization, but I believe the engagement to Princess Flora was canceled a little prematurely. Perhaps you could have allowed him a little more time to make up his mind?” Duke Huguenot suggested.

“I didn’t see him changing his mind even if we gave him more time. He said so himself that he wanted to marry Princess Rosalie, not Flora. If I absolutely had to give him time to think, the maximum limit I would allow is up until our departure tomorrow. I made my decision with that in mind,” Christina argued back calmly. She hadn’t even shared the situation with Francois yet, and she had a feeling Hiroaki wasn’t particularly in love with Rosalie either, but she didn’t mention any of this out loud.

“However, if we consult with King Francois on this matter, we could potentially ask him not to allow Hiroaki to marry Princess Rosalie. And even if it was decided that Princess Rosalie is to be his first wife, wouldn’t Princess Flora be adequate as a second wife?” Duke Huguenot paused for a short moment before rebutting. “So wouldn’t it be better to keep the engagement as a possibility?”

“If Princess Rosalie doesn’t end up becoming Sir Hiroaki’s first wife, we’ll need to discuss whether he still has any intention of marrying someone as such. Of course, Sir

Hiroaki's opinion will be prioritized, but I plan on nominating myself as a candidate if that happens."

Christina revealed her intention to become Hiroaki's fiancée.

"Sister…?" Flora broke her silence out of surprise.

"Breaking a publicly announced engagement would have caused problems, but as first princess, I would've been better suited for the position in the first place. If Sir Hiroaki is fixed on having Princess Rosalie as his first wife, then it's the perfect time to break the engagement without any problems. We've merely wiped the slate clean. Is there an issue with that?"

"No… It would indeed be more convenient for the organization if you were the candidate for the first wife. If that is your intention, then I will not argue further regarding Sir Hiroaki's case." Duke Huguenot swallowed his objections and came to a quiet acceptance.

She got me. I cannot argue back like this… Duke Huguenot thought to himself. He personally would have preferred Flora over Christina, as it would be easier to control her as Hiroaki's first wife. But with things like this, he could only hope Hiroaki would change his mind by the next morning. However, the chance of that happening was slim.

"Is that all you wanted to discuss?" Christina asked.

"No. I also wished to discuss Haruto…Sir Amakawa with you," the duke said. His ability to cleanly detach himself from one thought and move on to the next subject was as sharp as ever.

"Let's hear it."

"Like I've said many times now, he is someone we should have on our side no matter what. Even if he doesn't join the Restoration, we want him to be willing to act for our sake in an emergency."

"Indeed… That would be preferable," Christina agreed. The reason she took a few seconds to reply was because the

fact that Haruto Amakawa's true identity was the boy she'd known in the academy had crossed her mind.

The final straw that caused him to leave the kingdom was your son. I'll never say those words out loud, but the temptation to throw it in his face and denounce him is there.

Christina stared at Duke Huguenot, imagining exactly that. She wasn't aware that he had sent Latifa after Rio as an assassin, but she had enough reason to feel angered even without knowing that.

Not that I can speak, considering how I did nothing back then…

Christina felt bitter regret for being equally guilty. Beside her, Flora seemed to be thinking to herself, as her complexion was rather poor.

"What do you intend on doing about his reward?" a clueless Duke Huguenot asked.

"When it comes to a reward befitting his achievements, we can't decide right away. It needs to be something he'll find appealing… Since I've obtained a time extension on the reward, I plan on deepening our friendship to sound him out."

"I see…"

"Did you have a good idea?" Christina asked.

"Under normal practices, I would suggest the hand in marriage of someone powerful from the Restoration. Fortunately, he is still a young and unmarried man."

"Indeed, a normal noble would probably rejoice at that…" Christina had no choice but to agree; marrying a noblewoman from a powerful family led to success in life. An ordinary noble would naturally be delighted.

"Now that King Francois has given Sir Amakawa a mansion on the castle grounds, we can assume he is seriously attempting to win him over. While it may be impossible to send a first wife from the Restoration, it would be preferable to have him take in a high-ranking wife," Duke

Huguenot said eloquently.

The fact that Francois had given away a residence normally restricted to royalty was a clear message to the royal and noble classes both in and out of the kingdom—to keep their hands off Haruto Amakawa without his permission. Thus, if they made a move on Rio without Francois's permission hereafter, they'd be picking a fight with the Galarc Kingdom—their own alliance partner.

"We cannot disregard Sir Amakawa's own wishes, and I doubt the high-ranked positions will be taken immediately, but simply watching on silently would be foolish. He has many attractive women around him already... Perhaps it would be best to discuss things with King Francois soon?" Duke Huguenot continued, giving his opinion clearly.

Christina fell silent with a frown. Given that she knew Rio's past, she believed a marriage to a Restoration noblewoman would just be an unwelcome annoyance to him.

However, Duke Huguenot's opinion was completely valid from the position of the Restoration as an organization, and as the head of the organization, it would be unnatural for her to refuse.

"Would that have any adverse effects?"

"No..." Christina shook her head slowly at Duke Huguenot's question.

"That leaves the matter of who to offer as a candidate. If we are to offer a marriage as a reward, we will need to offer a noblewoman from a high-ranking family. At present, the highest ranked noblewoman the Restoration can prepare is Duke Fontaine's eldest daughter, Roanna, I suppose."

"Roanna is Sir Hiroaki's attendant right now. Wasn't she placed near him with the intention of marriage? That is something she accepted herself."

"Yes. However, realistically speaking, it all comes down to rank. Sir Hiroaki outwardly expressed his disapproval towards the ranking of wives, but I believe he has his order

of favorites already… For convenience, he's accepted that the top rank goes to the first wife, but he seems to be particular about who that should be," said Duke Huguenot, analyzing the hero. After all, Hiroaki had started to insist on Rosalie as his first wife.

"And Roanna is low on that list?"

"No. She's probably rather high on Sir Hiroaki's internal list right now. However, he seems generally on board with the addition of new wives. That list may change if he gets more of them."

"So you mean that Roanna's real ranking may fall. The downside of not having a public ranking may occur," Christina said, making a conjecture based on Duke Huguenot's statements.

One of the major reasons why high-ranked noble families had multiple wives in the first place was simply because there was too much work for just the first wife and her children to handle. There were a small number of nobles who didn't practice polygamy and stuck to just their beloved first wife, but having many wives was a symbol of prosperity as a noble, as it meant having enough work to allocate to all the children between the wives.

That being said, it was custom for the children of higher ranked wives to be given more important work, and the wives themselves were treated better. That was because the ranking system of the wives also functioned as an agreement to avoid unnecessary conflict between the wives and children.

"If he were to increase the number of wives he has without the use of a ranking system, it would be inevitable for there to be conflict in which child does what work. Increasing the number of wives also means the benefit each child receives will be reduced, so it is easy to imagine the bitter competition between them," Duke Huguenot said, sighing.

"I feel we've strayed a little off topic, but… In other

words, instead of letting Roanna marry Sir Hiroaki under such uncertain conditions, it would be better for her to marry Sir Amakawa. Is that what you're saying?" Christina summarized.

"It would depend on Roanna's opinion on the matter, but I believe there's room to consider it."

"What do you mean…?"

"Sir Hiroaki seems to be particularly opposed to the idea of ranking his wives and restricting his ability to interact with them as he wishes. Thus, as long as that obstacle is overcome, it should be possible to convince him to use ranks. The topic is a little sensitive, so I was waiting for the right time to approach him about it, but it seems that has backfired on me. I doubt Sir Hiroaki would be willing to listen in his current state…"

Not only had his marriage talks with Liselotte—his favorite—resulted in failure, there had been a brief dispute over his declaration to marry Rosalie first. It wasn't a topic to discuss when he was in his current mood.

"I believe betrothing Roanna to Sir Amakawa under such circumstances would make him more irritated, though," Christina pointed out calmly.

"Possibly. However, with his present demands to marry Princess Rosalie as his first wife, it's difficult to guess where his true intentions lie. It may be disrespectful, but hinting at an engagement between Roanna and Sir Amakawa may be able to reveal some answers in that regard," Duke Huguenot answered coolly.

So we're turning the tables by shaking him up. He really is harsh in this regard. Christina was half exasperated and half impressed.

"I understand your aim. But there's no guarantee Sir Amakawa will agree to marry Roanna, and it could potentially eliminate any chance of Roanna marrying Sir Hiroaki in the future. We'd also need to consult King Francois. Above all, we have to confirm what Roanna thinks

about it first. I believe the likelihood of this working out is low…" Christina said, listing the issues with Duke Huguenot's plan.

"Of course. However, if she's aiming for the position of Sir Hiroaki's second wife, I'm sure there's plenty of benefit in it for Roanna as well. Surely it should be worth consideration?"

Christina paused reluctantly, but was unable to find a strong enough case to argue against it. "In that case, I will approach her about it."

"Sir Haruto and Roanna may get married…?" Flora mumbled quietly.

"Just in case, my daughter with my second wife could also be a candidate. She's fourteen, but considering Sir Amakawa's achievements, she may be a little too lacking to offer as a high-ranked wife." Duke Huguenot shrewdly offered his daughter as a candidate under a guise of modesty.

I see… So this was his real intention.

He took her by surprise by suggesting the unlikely plan of using Roanna, then offered a more realistic possibility as an alternative. It was a clever way of going about things.

"There's also the option of just offering Flora as a candidate," Christina said.

"Huh?!" Flora squeaked. She looked somewhat—or rather, outright—pleased about it, if Christina wasn't mistaken.

"I'm joking…" *Though you sure looked happy about it,* Christina thought to herself.

It would be one thing if it was for a hero like Hiroaki, but there was no precedent of a major nation's royalty marrying into any position lower than a noble's first wife. If they did such a thing, they'd face backlash from the nobles of the Restoration.

"R-Right… Of course."

Flora nodded in a daze. This time she looked somewhat

disappointed. Incidentally, Duke Huguenot was similarly surprised, but since Christina immediately admitted it was a joke, he didn't comment on it in particular.

While it's certainly realistic from his position, offering Duke Huguenot's daughter to Sir Amakawa is out of the question.

Christina dismissed the matter in her head. There was no way he would accept that, so even Roanna was more likely at that point. She couldn't do something as disrespectful as recommending Duke Huguenot's daughter to Rio for marriage—even the thought of it was repulsive to her—so she had to stop this plan in its tracks. Even if she were to bring it up to him, she'd need to approach it clearly under the premise of rejection. Thus…

I have no other choice…

Christina hesitated for a long moment before speaking.

"I would like to recommend Professor Celia as a candidate."

In reality, the most attractive reward the Restoration could offer to Rio would be an arrangement with Celia. However, using Rio and Celia's relationship to their advantage made Christina feel a sense of inferiority and guilt. But there was no other option.

"Celia, you say…? Indeed, she would be the closest person to Haruto within the Restoration, and as the eldest daughter of a count family, she would meet the minimum standard for a reward…" Duke Huguenot said, but he seemed to disapprove nonetheless.

"Is there a problem?" Christina asked, tilting her head.

"No. I just cannot figure out the relationship between the two. It's clear that they're extremely close, but I don't believe they're dating. Celia is five years older, so it's possible that Sir Amakawa doesn't see her in that way," Duke Huguenot said.

"Wouldn't it be rude to assume that based on their age gap alone? There's no telling without Sir Amakawa's

confirmation.” Christina’s voice took on a cold tone.

“Indeed, you are correct. My apologies.” Duke Huguenot bowed his head, realizing he had touched upon the taboo topic of a woman’s age.

“At any rate, I will discuss this matter with Sir Amakawa, Professor Celia, and Roanna myself. There’s no guarantee any marriage will happen, so do not make any moves of your own judgment. Allow me to see it through to the end. If things get too complicated, we’ll end up incurring Sir Amakawa’s displeasure.” Christina casually took the matter of Rio’s reward into her own hands, omitting Duke Huguenot’s daughter from the candidates.

“Understood.”

Duke Huguenot had no choice but to nod. And so, their discussion came to an end.

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That night, before their departure for Rodania the next morning, Christina invited Roanna to the living room of her quarters in the Galarc Castle. Flora was there as well, as they shared the same rooms.

“Sorry to call you out so late at night,” Christina said from the sofa across from Roanna.

“Not at all. It’s an honor to be invited. I’m so happy I’m able to speak to the two of you like this again,” Roanna said, bowing her head.

“I’m also glad to be able to see my childhood friend again,” Christina replied with a soft smile.

“Those words are wasted on me. I was unable to do anything despite being on board the same airship. I lived comfortably while the two of you went through such harsh times…” Roanna grimaced in pain, uttering her feelings of remorse.

“There’s no need for you to feel guilty, Roanna,” Flora objected with a frown.

“Yes, don’t be mistaken. There was nothing you could have done even if you had been there. In fact, it’s because you were there that Vanessa was saved after we were gone. Thank you so much for that,” Christina said.

“No… I may have saved her life, but I was late in discovering her and slow to treat her, so she’s still unconscious. She was the same way when I left Rodania, and her life may be in danger if she doesn’t regain her consciousness soon…” Roanna replied regretfully.

“As long as she’s alive, there’s hope. You did your best. That’s all that matters, and that’s more than enough.”

“Yes, it’s exactly as my sister says.”

“Thank you very much…” Roanna continued holding her head low.

“There’s another reason why I’ve called you here. Let’s discuss that next, shall we?” Christina said, changing the topic.

“Of course,” Roanna answered, nodding respectfully.

“The situation is rather complicated, but what I’m about to discuss with you is based on my firm trust in your loyalty to the kingdom. I don’t know whether it will actually happen, and there are risks involved, so I’d like to make a decision after considering your freedom to choose what you want. Please listen with that in mind.”

“What is this about…?” Roanna tilted her head curiously at Christina’s carefully worded lead-up.

“The truth is, when I was discussing Sir Amakawa’s reward with Duke Huguenot, he recommended you as a potential candidate for marriage.”

Roanna paused for a long moment before echoing Christina’s words in confusion. “M-Me…as Sir Amakawa’s fiancée, you say?”

“Even if we can’t have him join the organization, we want to have a strong connection to Sir Amakawa—that was the reasoning behind this decision. However, if we were to offer a betrothal as a reward, we need to provide a

noblewoman worthy of his achievements. As the eldest daughter of Duke Fontaine, one of the three noble powers of Beltrum, you satisfy that requirement," Christina explained, slightly conflicted.

"B-But I'm…"

"Yes. While it hasn't been made public, you've been attending to Sir Hiroaki as a potential marriage candidate. However, Sir Hiroaki is an extremely fickle person. While he agreed to the selection of a first wife, he expressed disapproval towards the ranking of his wives."

"Right…"

"I'm sure you understand already, but the lack of a ranking order is rather problematic. I hear Sir Hiroaki clearly professed his disgust, but it may be possible to convince him of the harm it could cause with time… If he still refuses to use ranks, then there's no way of knowing how much favor each wife will be granted. Even as the oldest daughter of Duke Fontaine, you would not be an exception," Christina pointed out clearly.

Roanna fell silent without expressing any denial.

"We've yet to hold a discussion, but King Francois must be wanting to tie Sir Amakawa to his own country with an engagement to someone influential as well. So even if we offer you as a candidate, your rank would not be any higher than his candidate."

It was practically unheard of for the oldest daughter of a duke to marry lower than first wife to anyone other than a hero or king of a major nation. Haruto Amakawa was neither of those options. However, the fact Christina had brought up marriage with him in spite of that held meaning that Roanna could understand.

"If I settle as Sir Amakawa's second or third wife now, I'd receive more benefit than being one of Sir Hiroaki's many wives in the future. Is that what you're saying?"

"Only because Sir Amakawa has the abilities, achievements, and position to seem appealing," Christina

confirmed, sighing with worry. “But if I’m honest, I do not wish to make Sir Amakawa’s reward a marriage talk with the Restoration,” Christina said truthfully.

“Why would you think that…?”

“I am only admitting this because it’s you, but I believe bringing up marriage to Sir Amakawa has a high possibility of being seen as a nuisance. If I absolutely had to offer a fiancée to him, the most realistic candidate I can think of is Professor Celia. I’m sorry, but I’ve recommended Professor Celia for this reason.”

“Thank you for informing me.” Roanna bowed her head deeply. The fact Christina was willing to keep her informed about things unfavorable to her was proof of their trust in each other.

“There are several problems with offering you as a candidate to marry Sir Amakawa. The chance of him accepting is low, offering you may immediately incur Sir Hiroaki’s displeasure, and Professor Celia may be chosen as candidate instead. Even if Sir Amakawa were to accept, depending on how our discussions with the Galarc Kingdom go, you could be reduced to a lower ranked wife,” Christina said, listing some of the realistic issues at play.

“However, as long as you strongly wish for it, I can discuss things with King Francois and have you recommended as a marriage candidate from the Restoration. This is also a chance for you to gain success as a noble. It’s only because it’s you that I’m leaving my decision up to your will,” she continued, seeking Roanna’s thoughts.

“This is such a sudden discussion. I’m honestly quite unsure,” Roanna said frankly. The reason she hadn’t immediately refused was most likely because of her awareness as an unmarried noblewoman. With the exception of certain cases, divorce amongst nobles was deemed unacceptable in the Beltrum Kingdom. That was why marrying someone required the resolution to carry out the fate of a noble and devotion of one’s entire life to the

partner. Thus, one's life was decided by their marriage.

On top of that, Roanna was currently in a very insecure position. As the top faction of the new kingdom, all the important figures of Duke Fontaine's house—other than Roanna—were in the main Beltrum government. Anyone among them who found fault with Duke Arbor's ways were placed under house arrest as rebels.

Thanks to the deep trust the princesses had in her, Roanna was able to work her way up to her current position in the Restoration, but she had no backing from her house and limited funds from when she left them. The only thing she could use freely was her position as the eldest daughter of a duke house—in other words, her lineage. Since it was possible for the fate of the Fontaine house to end up in Roanna's hands depending on the situation from here on, this was an important decision that could end up affecting her family as well.

Roanna desperately racked her brains, calculating what she could do for the Restoration and her kingdom right now, as well as what she could do for the Fontaine house's precarious situation back in the main government.

"Since Sir Hiroaki has expressed his desire to marry Princess Rosalie as his first wife and distance himself from the Restoration, your hesitation is understandable. You don't have to give me an immediate reply here, so you can decide after watching Sir Hiroaki's actions from here onwards," Christina said, postponing her decision.

Honestly speaking, from Christina's point of view, in his current state, Hiroaki was a powerful drug that was dangerous to take. His existence was certainly appealing, but since she didn't want to take any action to force him to stay, she had to consider relinquishing him as a possibility.

Roanna took a long, deep breath. "No... It is because we don't know where Sir Hiroaki's heart is right now that I should be the one to tie him to the Restoration."

"Can I leave that to you? It's a huge role," Christina

asked, staring at Roanna.

“Yes. Who else could fulfill this role in the Restoration other than me?” Roanna nodded with determination.

“Right, my thoughts exactly.”

“So please, leave it to me.”

“All right. I’m so glad you’re here in the Restoration… I’ll leave Sir Hiroaki to you, Roanna, while Flora and I return to Rodania,” Christina said, smiling.

“Understood. It is in my hands,” Roanna said, nodding gracefully.

Even if Sir Hiroaki were to leave the Restoration, I’ll have to make sure this girl marries the best marriage partner possible.

That was the duty Christina vowed to herself quietly.

Interlude: In Rubia

Roughly four days ago, immediately after Rio and the princesses escaped from the Rubia Kingdom…

“Ah, there’s no way we can win against that. Damn it, how infuriating…” Arein stabbed his sword into the ground and muttered to himself with heavy fatigue.

Are Lucci and Ven still alive?

He then looked for his colleagues who had slammed into the fortress walls earlier. The two of them had enhanced their physical bodies through their swords, so their defenses were increased, but Rio had struck them fairly mercilessly.

He tried to go over to them to check if they were unluckily struck dead, or at the very least knocked out.

“Hey!” Kikuchi Renji, the hero beside Arein, yelled at him angrily.

“Huh?”

“What was that monster of a man?!”

“We already told you. That’s the bastard who killed our commander—the one that defeated you. He’s our enemy.”

“Why can he fly?!”

Arein thought for a moment before answering tiredly. “How would I know? It’s probably his enchanted sword.”

“Hey! Arein, was it?!”

Sylvie descended from a flying griffin.

And now it’s the princess. Arein sighed in heavy annoyance.

At the same time, Reiss appeared from inside the fortress, observing the courtyard. “Oh my, it seems like you’ve been beaten rather badly.”

Countless arrows had gouged open, frozen, and stabbed the ground. The courtyard was a complete wasteland. The

shock waves of the fight had blown away the archers on the wall, and some of them were yet to regain their footing after their knees gave out.

“Reiss…” Sylvie glared at him.

“They’ve unfortunately gotten away, but there’s nothing to be done about that. Arein, you go check on Lucci and Ven,” Reiss said easily. Arein immediately left.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! You’re the one who made this plan, right?! You said if we trapped him in this courtyard with two princesses dragging him down, we’d win…!” Sylvie said angrily at Reiss.

They had closed the gate on Rio the moment he stepped into the courtyard, so Arein and the others could fight him. There were archers surrounding him on the walls, and the griffins hiding outside the fortress would have sealed off their escape route after the battle began. The outcome would have been decided with that, so all that was left was to wait for Rio’s surrender.

That had been the plan, but things didn’t work that way.

“I believe you were also satisfied with the strategy, Princess Sylvie?”

“Haruto Amakawa’s combat strength is beyond imagination. If I had known he could fly while carrying two princesses…” She would have opposed the plan.

“You should have been aware of his strength, no? You witnessed his efforts at the banquet in Galarc, and I also told you he killed Lucius, who defeated the hero Renji. I approached you for your cooperation precisely because of his strength.” Reiss answered Sylvie’s question vaguely.

Well, it’s not like I expected him to be trapped in a fortress like this to begin with.

Reiss wasn’t particularly panicked, having expected their escape from the beginning.

“Guh…”

Sylvie ground her teeth. She hadn’t underestimated Haruto Amakawa on purpose.

Now the Rubia Kingdom has no choice but to change sides to the Proxia Empire, regardless of their connection to the hero Renji. The hero won't be able to oppose us with Princess Sylvie and Princess Estelle on our side either. Galarc and the Restoration will have to divert some of their wariness towards the Rubia Kingdom too. What a perfect outcome.

Reiss chuckled secretly to himself.

"Haruto Amakawa… Is he a hero too?" Renji asked with a stern look.

"I don't believe so. What makes you think that?" Reiss asked.

"Nothing…" Renji muttered.

It sure sounds like a Japanese name. But he didn't have a Japanese face. Was he also teleported here?

He pondered over various possibilities for Rio's identity. But none of them mattered in the end. There was something more important bothering him.

If he isn't a hero, then why is he stronger than me? The same goes for that Lucius man. Does it mean there's a stronger cheat-like power in this world than the heroes? Why am I so…

Weak? That was what frustrated him the most. That's why he couldn't protect Sylvie and Estelle. He lost to Lucius. He couldn't even defeat Haruto Amakawa.

In the end, he felt pathetic. That was so frustrating and hate-inducing that his blood felt like it had reached its boiling point.

I'm so weak…!

Renji quietly shook with fury.

Loathing. He loathed his weakness. He was also exceedingly enraged at Haruto Amakawa for perfectly protecting two princesses in front of him.

I need more power. I have to become stronger. Better. Strong enough for the rest of this world to fear defying me…

Just by hearing his name, his opponents would cower and avoid battle. They wouldn't even think about raising their weapons at him—that was how strong he had to become. Renji quietly decided that in order to remain himself, he had to become someone like that.

"Princess Sylvie!"

The supervisor of the fortress, Marco Tonterri, left the fortress walls where he had been directing the archers to come down to the courtyard. He was in a fluster after being overwhelmed by Rio's strength from above the walls.

"Th-This is bad! This is terrible! The moment they hear we attacked Beltrum's First and Second Princesses... We've practically declared war on our allies, the Galarc Kingdom and Restoration!" He pointed out the obvious impending danger.

"Silence, Tonterri. I know that." Sylvie brushed him aside unhappily.

"It won't result in an instant outbreak of war. This incident will make them suspect that the Rubia Kingdom has betrayed them for the Proxia Empire. The balance of power in the Strahl region is currently finely balanced. They'll probably try to pressure you, but we'll make sure to support you when that happens," Reiss said, offering support in a friendly but detached tone.

"Wh-What are you saying, Sir Bernard...?" Marco looked at Reiss with suspicion. Bernard was the family name of the noble house Reiss used when moving about the Rubia Kingdom. In other words, Marco was unaware of Reiss's identity.

"The truth is, I'm a noble of the Proxia Empire."

"Wha..." When Reiss revealed his background, Marco's jaw dropped.

"We're in the same boat now, the Proxia Empire and the Rubia Kingdom. Let's get along well, shall we?"

"..."

Sylvie fell silent with a scowl, while Marco was still

dumbfounded. Reiss's cheerful voice was out of place in such a scene.

Is this guy a psycho? Renji stared at Reiss unhappily.

"You'll be with me for the time being," Reiss said to him.

"What are you going to make me do…?"

"I'm going to make you stronger. The same applies for the other heroes, but you're only able to bring out a small portion of your Divine Arms' powers right now."

"What?"

"I'm saying I can make you stronger."

"How come you're able to do that? No, even if you can do that, why would you?" Renji shot Reiss a look as if he thought Reiss was being fishy.

"I need you to move for my sake in the future, you know? That's why I have to make you stronger. We'll be cooperating with each other at some point, so this is a symbol of my trust," Reiss answered cheerfully. "Don't you want to become stronger?"

"Fine…" Renji nodded his head, in his desire for strength.

Interlude: In Centostella

In a certain room of the Centostella royal castle…

Sendo Aki was dreaming. It was a dream from her childhood—a dream from nine years ago, before Haruto and Aki's parents divorced.

Back then, she really adored older kids, she thought to herself. The Amakawa house had two working parents at the time, so they weren't able to pay much attention to their children. The ones who looked after Aki in their place were Haruto and Miharu, which was why it was only natural for her to adore them as older kids.

Haruto was always close with Miharu. To Aki, they made the perfect pair. They were so close that they sometimes went off into their own world, but Aki loved watching the two of them play together like that.

"Haruto, Miharu…"

Before she knew it, Aki was calling Haruto and Miharu's names in her dream. It was strange. Normally, just the reminder of Haruto being her older brother was enough to fill her with conflicted thoughts, but she didn't feel anything unpleasant right now. Aki had returned to her childhood self—back to the times when she only had pure, unconflicted feelings.

A young Haruto and Miharu were reflected in Aki's eyes. Their surroundings were pitch black; only the space where they stood with Aki was white. Beside them were the toys they'd used while playing house together when they were young. Whenever the three of them played house, Haruto and Miharu had been the parents, while Aki had always volunteered herself for the role of the daughter first. That way, she could be spoiled by her two favorite people.

Being spoiled by the two of them was Aki's special right as their younger sister. And so there was only one thing Aki wanted to do in this situation:

"Haruto! Miharu! Let's play house! I wanna be the child!"

Whenever she said that, Haruto and Miharu always agreed.

"Sure."

"Let's play, Aki."

See? Haruto and Miharu were smiling as they nodded. With the three of them together, they could have fun playing house. If only such happy times could continue forever, Aki always thought.

"I want to have a sleepover with us just like this," Aki mumbled softly in her dream.

Haruto and Miharu exchanged a look at that.

"It's not a weekend day tomorrow, so we can't," Haruto explained with a troubled look.

"Aww... But I want to sleep between you and Miharu." Aki's head drooped in disappointment. She wanted to be with Haruto and Miharu more. She was envious of how close they were, but they never left Aki out and always included her with kindness.

"Mm... But the only days we can sleep over are on the weekends."

"Isn't there anything you can do about that, Haru-kun?" Miharu hesitantly pleaded to a contemplating Haruto.

"If you insist, then I'd like to..." Haruto hummed indecisively. "How about you sleep in my room today, Aki?" he suggested.

Aki's face brightened immediately. "Huh? Can I really?"

"Sure. But Aki, you're always sleeping with mom and dad, right? You won't wake up crying, will you?"

"I-I won't cry! I'll be fine if I'm sleeping with you!"

"All right then. Let's do that, Aki."

Haruto smiled at Aki's red-faced protests.

“Th-That’s not fair, Aki…” Miharu muttered quietly; she had been watching their conversation.

“Mii-chan. Don’t act like Aki now,” Haruto said with an exasperated expression.

“Hmph. I know…”

“You can sleep over at our place next weekend, Mii-chan.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Ehe heh.” Miharu beamed happily.

“Can I sleep together with you?” Aki asked nervously.

“Yup, sure you can,” Haruto and Miharu both replied while smiling.

“Ehe heh! It’s a promise!”

“Yeah, a promise.”

“Both of you have to stay with me forever, okay?” Aki pleaded with a broad smile.

“Yeah.”

“We’ll always be with you, Aki.”

Haruto and Miharu both nodded with beaming faces, when—

“Haruto? Miharu?”

Aki worriedly called out to them. Suddenly, Aki’s vision went completely black; she couldn’t see anything other than herself.

“Aki.”

In the darkness, she could hear Haruto and Miharu’s voices.

Oh, thank goodness… It’s my brother and Miharu… Aki rejoiced in relief. But that only lasted for a moment.

“…?!” Aki woke up with a gasp.

“A dream…” she mumbled to herself, sitting up in bed.

She really had awakened from a dream, because neither Haruto nor Miharu were in the Centostella Castle with her.

More importantly, the person who was once Amakawa Haruto was already dead. Yet he was also alive—he had been

reborn into this world, and was currently living together with Miharu somewhere.

Why did I have a dream like this…

She played with Haruto, heard his voice, and felt happiness from it. *It may have been just a dream, but why did it happen…?* Aki wondered to herself with a bitter expression. A variety of emotions flashed across her mind in a single moment.

He didn't keep his promise. He said the three of us would stay together. That he'd be with me forever. He promised, and yet…

Miharu didn't break her promise. She stayed beside me even after mom got divorced. She spent every day with me, holding my hand while I was sad.

She was different from him.

But…

"Now Miharu is gone too…" Aki muttered tearfully, as though she was seeking some form of salvation.

Even Aki knew, deep down, that the feelings she had carried with her for so many years were unjustified. But logic was different from emotions, which was why she'd carried her resentment with her this entire time. She continued believing that she was the one in the right. She didn't want to believe she was wrong.

But now…

"It's morning…" Aki's gaze wandered as though searching for someone, then landed on the window in disappointment. It was already bright outside.

Presently, as the siblings of the hero Takahisa, Aki and Masato were staying at the Centostella Castle as national guests. But there wasn't anything in particular for them to do here.

Aki tried to visit Takahisa's room every day, but they didn't spend much time together. Ever since the incident in the Galarc Castle, Takahisa had taken to shutting himself away in his room.

He now preferred to be alone. While he was more relaxed around Aki, being that she was his step-sister, their conversations were awkward and couldn't keep going like they used to, so he would tell Aki to return to her room and leave him in peace. Because of this, Aki rarely saw him outside of his room.

Instead, her time with her younger step-brother increased. Masato was busy continuing his sword training even after coming to Centostella, but he made as much time as possible for Aki, who was in low spirits these days. He always visited her outside of his training hours.

Back at the stone house... Or rather, back in Japan, Aki and Masato hadn't been such close, clingy siblings. They were the siblings that commonly cracked sarcastic jokes at each other without any affectionate conversation between the two of them. But lately, Masato would spend long hours at a time beside Aki, even if it was just in silence.

Aki was so grateful for this that she naturally found herself visiting Masato whenever she wasn't in Takahisa's room. Their time together increased without her noticing.

"I wonder if Masato's training this morning as well..." Aki mumbled to herself as she got changed to visit the training grounds.

◇ ◇ ◇

Ever since coming to Centostella, Aki and Masato had increasingly spent more time together, while Masato and Takahisa barely spent any time together.

After wandering into this other world, their family had finally reunited in this castle. Yet ever since the incident at the Galarc Castle, the three of them hadn't spent a single second gathered together to enjoy each other's company because of the deterioration of the sibling bond between Masato and Takahisa. When they first arrived in Centostella, Masato had still visited Takahisa, who stayed shut in his

room regularly, but with Takahisa's lingering guilt about the Galarc incident and Masato's own thoughts on the events, a huge argument had broken out between them.

Masato had continued visiting Takahisa's room despite the arguments taking place each time, but that seemed to be a bad move to make. They were now in a cold war with each other, and as far as Aki knew, hadn't seen each other in three weeks.

I have to be the one to help the two of them make up again... Aki thought to herself as she made her way to the training grounds with a gloomy face. Recently, her mind had been filled with negative thoughts whether she was alone or not.

There was a female knight at Aki's side as a guard, but they didn't particularly converse with each other. Thus, before she knew it, Aki had arrived at the training grounds.

"What is it, Masato?! Why'd you bring me out here so early in the morning?!" Takahisa called out.

"It's your fault for not leaving your room in days! You know you'll ruin your health if you keep living like that, right? And besides, Aki's been down in the dumps these days. You're her older brother yet you're just hovering around doing nothing!"

Takahisa's yelling voice echoed over. It seemed like Masato was also present, and the two were fighting. Aki ran over in a hurry, entering the training grounds.

"Lady Aki... Good morning." Centostella's First Princess Lilianna noticed Aki's presence and approached her.

"Good morning, Miss Lilianna. What's going on here...?" Aki asked, looking over at Takahisa and Masato arguing a slight distance away from the entrance.

"I passed by Sir Masato on his way to the training grounds this morning, and the topic of Sir Takahisa came up..." Lilianna frowned with worry.

When he heard Takahisa hadn't left his room in days, Masato had charged into his room in a fury.

“If you’re our brother, you should act like it.”

“What do you mean ‘act like it’? You’re just saying whatever you want.” Takahisa had a sour expression on his face.

“Haruto always thought of us first before anything. But you only care about yourself. Both back in Galarc, and ever since coming here, you’ve only cared about yourself. Why do you think Aki and I came to this kingdom with you?”

“The only thing that ever comes out of your mouth is Haruto this, Haruto that…” Takahisa’s face grew grim at the mention of Haruto’s name. However, an argument of this level was still on the mild side of things—they had fought more fiercely before. That’s why they had avoided seeing each other until now.

“…”

Aki was unable to move and merely watched her brothers fight. She knew her words would have no effect on them. In fact, she wasn’t even sure if stopping them was the right thing to do.

In reality, she had tried to stop their fights numerous times until now, and they were still at odds with each other. Merely stopping them was no use—that was what she felt.

However, she had no idea what she could do instead… There was no confidence left in Aki’s expression.

“Pick up your sword, bro,” Masato suddenly said.

“What?”

“I’m telling you to spar with me.”

“What kind of craziness are you spouting? There’s no point in doing that.”

“I’m telling you not to run away.”

“Run away? When have I ever run away? I’m not running away from anything!” Takahisa gradually grew more irritated.

“Then fight me. And if I win, you have to stop running away.”

“Like I said, I’m not…”

“You are, though. Shutting yourself in your room all day. You’re running from me, from Aki, and from Princess Lilianna. You’re running from everyone worried about you.”

“What…?” Takahisa tried to argue back, but no specific words came out.

Before he could do so, Masato spoke up. “If you’re not running, then you can spar with me, right?”

“…”

“So you *are* running. How pathetic.” Masato snorted before shooting him a mocking smirk.

“Fine… I’ll fight you.”

Either because he had found his resolve or he thought he wouldn’t lose to Masato, Takahisa agreed in a low voice.

“It’s decided. Here.” Masato threw one of the training swords in his hands at Takahisa.

“Hmph.” Takahisa picked up the training sword from the ground in displeasure.

Lilianna exhaled lightly, then immediately gave the female knight beside her an order. “Kiara. You act as the judge.”

“Understood.” Kiara nodded with respect, then walked towards the two of them. Thus, it was decided that they would hold a sparring match.

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Masato and Takahisa faced each other from different corners of the training grounds. Masato was equipped with a one-handed sword and shield while Takahisa gripped a hand-and-a-half sword in both his hands.

“I don’t wanna hear any excuses about how you were going easy on me after your defeat, bro,” Masato said. It was more of a confirmation than a provocation.

“We’re four years apart in age. There’s no way I’d lose to a child like you,” Takahisa replied sullenly, mood soured by those words.

“Hmph. I don’t know about that. I wasn’t the one who shut myself in my room. You don’t know how much stronger I’ve gotten, do you?” This time, Masato spoke with the intention of provoking him.

“Don’t look down on me.” Takahisa was even more sullen at that.

The acting judge, Kiara, stood between them, sighing quietly before mediating their argument. “Both sides, mind your mouths. You’re competing purely with sword ability. If I deem the match too dangerous, I will suspend it immediately.”

“I’m ready whenever, Miss Kiara,” Masato replied, holding his sword and shield ready.

Takahisa maintained his silence, but he also seemed ready to go. He held his sword while glaring at Masato with a stern look.

“Begin!” Kiara said, signaling the start of the match.

At the same time, Takahisa lifted his sword up and charged at Masato. He had no intention of sounding out Masato’s abilities or moves; he intended on deciding the match immediately. It was an action made on his firm confidence that he was the stronger one.

“I can see right through you!”

Masato aimed for the moment when Takahisa swung down and stepped forward. He charged with his shield first and deflected Takahisa’s sword when it was unable to fully swing down. Using his forward momentum, he lightly struck the pommel of his sword hidden behind his shield into Takahisa’s torso.

“Guh…”

There hadn’t been enough force to make it a painful blow, but Takahisa stumbled back under the force of the attack.

“If this was a match between knights, that would have been a telling blow. But we don’t have to count that one. It’d be too disappointing if it ended like this,” Masato said,

giving Takahisa another chance.

The embarrassment he felt because he'd lost again against an opponent he thought was weaker just made Takahisa angrier.

"Go on, come at me."

Masato hopped backwards, distancing himself without lowering his guard while spurring on Takahisa's fighting spirit.

"Ngh!" Takahisa charged at Masato once again. The second round had started. Meanwhile—

Lilianna, who was watching the match beside Aki, turned to the captain of her knights. "What do you think, Hilda?"

"I could tell Sir Masato was more used to handling the sword from the moment he positioned himself. His movements are efficient, as though he's experienced with real battles. I'm sure his own efforts played a huge part, but he has wonderful talent. Sir Amakawa's instruction before he came to our kingdom must have been brilliant too."

Hilda made no reference to Takahisa's abilities and praised Masato highly. She often sparred with Masato herself, so she knew of his talents well.

On top of that, Masato persistently stuck to Rio's teaching, doing his drills and sparring matches every day. Doing training drills every single day was something even full-time soldiers had difficulty accomplishing.

"It looks like Takahisa's the one putting pressure on him, though…" Aki said, looking at their fight. Only ten or so seconds had passed since the second round started, but right now it looked as though Takahisa was overwhelming Masato with his stronger build as he swung his sword.

"Sir Masato is seeing through all of Sir Takahisa's attacks and defending himself. If you wildly swing your sword while relying purely on strength, you'll soon run out of energy. Sir Masato is waiting for that moment—a truly calm plan."

That was another area where his real experience shone,

as Hilda had pointed out. Indeed, Masato was deftly handling all of Takahisa's attacks with his shield right now.

That ability comes from his experience rather than his intuition, I'd say. The ability to choose the best action for the situation was probably something Sir Amakawa drove into him. Sir Amakawa may be the type to fight logically.

While she didn't say it out loud, Hilda added to her analysis in her head.

"I-I see…"

Aki looked a little conflicted as she accepted the explanation. Since she lived together with them, she knew that Rio had been the one to teach Masato. Those teachings had accumulated into this moment, which was causing her conflicted feelings.

Just then, Masato stopped his defense against Takahisa and made his move. He parried the trajectory of Takahisa's swing with his shield.

"Let's go, Takahisa!"

Masato proceeded to slip right up to Takahisa.

"I won't let you!"

Takahisa reflexively twisted his body and aimed an acrobatic swing at Masato. The tip of his sword sliced the air, drawing a powerful arc. Masato instantly repositioned his shield to block Takahisa's sword.

Normally, one would be surprised by the unexpected approach of the sword and freeze, delaying their reaction, so being able to read the attack clearly and respond without fear to block it was truly splendid.

Once he blocked the attack, Masato had no choice but to charge forward to eliminate any openings.

"Guh…" Takahisa had twisted his entire body to swing his sword, so he was awfully off balance as he landed on the ground.

My brother hasn't practiced his basics at all and tries to use eccentric movements, which is what makes him scary. His reflexes are crazy, Masato thought tiredly.

“Hah!” Masato noticed the wide opening Takahisa had left and repositioned his shield to charge again. He proceeded to tackle Takahisa with the shield. Even though he was smaller than his brother, it was easy to topple Takahisa after he was staggering from his blocked sword attack.

“Ngh!”

Takahisa retreated on unsteady feet and slashed his sword horizontally with a pained look. But Masato stooped low and stepped forward sharply.

“Sloppy aim coming from you!”

The shield coming from down to up parried Takahisa’s sword. Masato then swung his sword in a compact move, intending on coming to a stop before making contact. This time, he secured his victory.

“I-It’s not over yet!” Just in that moment, Takahisa belatedly swung his sword. It traveled at a far faster speed than Masato’s.

“Wha…?!” The unnaturally rapid speed of the swing slammed Masato’s sword out of his hands. Having been overpowered in sword strength, Masato’s sword went flying, rotating several times as it danced through the air. Several beats later, it landed on the ground.

“Hey… Takahisa, you…”

Masato glared at Takahisa fiercely. At that last moment, it looked like Takahisa had used the physical strengthening effect of his Divine Arm to move. If he hadn’t done so, Masato would have won.

“I-I won,” Takahisa said in a slightly flustered high-pitched voice.

Masato paused for a long moment. “I see,” he said.

“Please wait a minute. That last move—”

“It’s fine, Kiara.”

Kiara was bothered by how Takahisa had accelerated at that last moment, and she tried to speak up as the mediator. However, Masato cut in and stopped her.

“But…”

“It’s my brother’s victory, right? Yeah? And you’re really okay with that, Takahisa? That’s how an older brother should be, right?” Ignoring Kiara’s hesitation, Masato stared at Takahisa sharply.

“…”

Takahisa averted his eyes shamefully, falling silent.

“I see how it is… Then it’s my loss. For today. Let’s fight again sometime.” Masato turned around with a pitiful expression, then walked away from Takahisa.

Chapter 3: To Rodania

Rio bid a temporary farewell to Satsuki, Charlotte, and Liselotte and boarded the Restoration's airship for Rodania. After boarding, he was invited to the living room where Christina and Flora were staying to wait for their arrival. Duke Huguenot had been excluded from Christina's invitation, so he was waiting in another room.

"Thank you for the invitation," Rio said to the sisters as soon as he sat down. Given how the three of them had traveled to the Galarc Kingdom's capital together, it felt a little strange.

"It's become natural for the three of us to be together lately, so it does feel a little odd. Only one day has passed since we arrived in the capital, but it feels like it's been a long time since we last saw each other."

"I was just thinking the same, Christina."

Apparently, Christina and Flora felt the same way as Rio. If there was anything that had changed between them, then that would be it.

"While we were traveling, the only time the artifact didn't change my hair color was when it was just the three of us in the house. Those were the times I could relax, but I cannot do that here. Perhaps that may be why."

Rio pointed out the difference between when he was alert and not. In other words, when the three of them traveled together, Rio interacted with Christina and Flora using his relaxed side more, but now he was here as Haruto Amakawa, his alert side instead.

"Indeed, we've also become more tense since rejoining the organization."

"I see…"

Christina and Flora agreed with him.

“Actually, there were several things I wanted to discuss before arriving in Rodania, which is why I called you here. You may not be able to unwind while you’re here, but would you be willing to hear me out for a while?”

“Of course. I’d be glad to.”

“Then I’ll start with the easiest topics. If you’re going to bring Miharu and your friends to the Galarc Kingdom, does that mean Sara and the others are in Rodania right now? I’m greatly indebted to Sara’s group, so I’d love to thank them again if possible.”

For her first topic, Christina brought up the location of Sara and the others.

“I have another stone house that I use for my travels. They’ve been using that to live quietly in the forest outskirts of Rodania.”

“I see.”

“I know where they’re located, so it’s possible for them to come to Rodania within a day or so. But like I’ve mentioned before, Sara and the others are young ladies from a minority group, and they’ve been taught to avoid kingdom politics. I believe they’d want to avoid attending anything with a political nuance, so if you could keep that in mind as you interact with them, it may be possible to arrange a meeting. I apologize for having so many requirements…”

Rio bowed his head. He wanted to leave the matter of whether they attended or not to the people in question, so he gave requirements even though he was speaking to two princesses.

“I understand. In that case, if Sara and the others visit Galarc with you, I’ll either find some time to visit your mansion or set aside some time to speak to them on the airship there. Would that be all right?” Christina suggested.

“Of course, I don’t mind, but…is it okay to bother two princesses like this?”

Although he was the one who set the conditions, Rio felt

slightly flustered by the thought of making two princesses visit him. In reality, it was very rare for royalty to go out of their way to visit the mansions of nobility.

"Yes. I wish to tell them thank you, so it's only polite for me to visit them. With the mansion belonging to you, there won't be a problem if we go using this pretense. If they visit you while in Rodania, I can arrange for no one from the Restoration to approach your estate during their stay," Christina stated clearly.

"Thank you very much for the consideration. Then I will contact you if Sara and the others decide to come."

Rio bowed his head respectfully.

"Please do. Then next is the topic of Professor Celia."

Christina brought up Celia's name somewhat reluctantly.

"Is something the matter with the professor?"

Rio had been unable to refer to Celia as "professor" in front of others lately and often referred to her without a title, but since there was no need to do so in front of the royal siblings who knew his identity, he followed Christina's lead and called her professor.

"I believe you should inform Professor Celia that we are aware of your identity now. What do you think about this?"

"Indeed, it may be difficult to interact without sharing that information," Rio agreed with a strained smile. "If you can arrange a setting without any third party, we can discuss it all together. But if that seems difficult, I can also inform her myself. I don't mind if the three of you discuss things yourselves afterwards," he suggested.

"In that case, I will try to arrange a meeting for just the four of us after we arrive in Rodania, but if that doesn't seem possible, we'll leave the explanation to you, Sir Amakawa," Christina said, figuring it would be better for Rio to be present at the explanation.

"Understood." Rio nodded, seeing no problem with that.

"On top of that, I'd like to discuss the reward from the Restoration to you for the incident this time."

Christina had been sitting elegantly to begin with, but she straightened her back even more as she brought up the topic of the reward. Then, sensing Christina's nerves, Rio spoke up.

"Yes. I'd prefer if you could decide on something modest, if possible. I don't wish to be a burden on you either, and there's nothing in particular I desire anyway," Rio stated with a frown.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm afraid the circumstances are rather unavoidable."

"Are you referring to what King Francois referred to as setting an example for others?"

"That is part of it, but the reward that was suggested for the Restoration to give to you is a betrothal to a prominent noblewoman of the organization." Christina sighed tiredly.

"A betrothal, you say…"

Indeed, that was a rather troubling reward. Extremely troubling—that was Rio's first thought.

"I suppose it would only be seen as a nuisance, after all?"

Christina sighed further, noticing the faint change in expression on Rio's face.

"While I'm terribly honored to receive such an offer…"

"My apologies. I knew it would be a bother, but I had to at least mention it or things would get more troublesome in the future," Christina said, bowing her head. She had to establish the fact she brought up the topic or she'd be hounded about it forever.

"No, it's not something Your Highness has to apologize for… I just didn't imagine such an offer would be made."

"That just shows how appealing your achievements were. At present, Duke Huguenot is quite insistent on this."

"Do you mean he wants a betrothal to a noblewoman of the Huguenot house? I didn't know there was one available…"

"He said he wanted to offer you his eldest daughter with his second wife, I believe. However, even I recognize this is

impossible considering the things his son did to you, so I can make up a reason to dismiss the idea," Christina stated clearly.

"I don't believe the daughter is at fault, but I'd be grateful if you did so."

"Understood. He should back down if I tell him you weren't interested when I brought up the topic of marriage. However, Duke Huguenot isn't the type to give up quietly. I can easily imagine him waiting for another chance to pressure you into a betrothal."

"I see..."

"Also, regardless of rewards, you may find yourself receiving more marriage talks from here onwards. While I'd love to be able to suppress them all for you, I'm afraid my current influence isn't enough for that... And so, I was hoping to prepare an excuse for you to get the nobles to back down from you. Perhaps we could discuss that in further detail now."

"What kind of excuse would be effective, specifically?"

"To be absolutely blunt, the most effective way to block all discussions of marriage is to have another marriage lined up," Christina said with a pained look.

"It certainly makes logical sense," Rio agreed with a wry smile.

"For example, if you've already decided upon a first wife, anyone aiming for that position will naturally eliminate themselves. Although that wouldn't have an effect on anyone who doesn't care about positions."

"If I may ask...will it be expected of me to have multiple wives like the nobility?"

"It's common for high-ranked nobles to have multiple wives. Your position as a noble is extremely unique, but considering your achievements, I believe many will want you to do the same."

Christina offered her conjecture to answer Rio's troubled question.

“They’ll want me to do so… But will it still be possible for me to remain faithful to one wife if I so desire?” Rio asked, confirming if the opposite interpretation of her words would apply.

“Yes. The greatest reason why noble families have multiple wives is to keep the key positions they manage within their own bloodline. Those who don’t mind leaving important positions to branch families or trusted retainers marry only once, but they’re in the minority. It’s common for multiple wives to be demanded of them after, and they end up unable to refuse…” Christina explained regarding the polygamy system.

The head house was where the head of the family shouldered the finances, while branch families were separate houses that made their living independently of the head house. Generally, branch families were created when nobles married wives who couldn’t give heirs to the family. In cases where one left the head house by marrying into another, no branch family was formed.

There was also a polygamy system to make sure there would always be an heir to the family, but if one was willing to bring someone from the branch family in as an heir, then there was no need for multiple wives either. There weren’t many nobles willing to think this way, however.

“I see… I’ve learned something today. Thank you very much,” Rio said to her in awe.

“Based on our conversation, it sounds like you are opposed to having multiple wives?”

“Yes, to be honest…” Rio nodded, fairly unenthusiastically.

“Umm… I apologize for asking out of the blue, but is that because you have a specific person in mind already?”

“A specific person, huh…? I wonder…”

“I’m sorry, that was rude of me to ask. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” Christina apologized quickly.

“No, that’s not what I meant… I’m just unable to think

about love and marriage at this time." Rio looked troubled, contemplating for a long moment before revealing his thoughts with a frown. However, his tone wasn't entirely negative. "But if I had a little…just a little bit more confidence in myself…I think I'd be able to consider things positively then."

He expressed his thoughts regarding marriage with a faint smile. He might have accomplished his revenge, but he wasn't able to immediately switch over to the idea of marriage and happiness so easily. There was still a part of him that looked down on himself. But at the same time, he potentially felt a vague hopefulness too.

Christina and Flora stared at Rio's expression like they were being sucked into it.

"I…see…" Christina replied awkwardly after a moment.

"The mood's become weird because of me. I'm sorry." Rio bowed his head with a strained smile.

Christina shook her head in a hurry. "No, I'm sorry for asking you something so improper."

◇ ◇ ◇

Several hours later, the enchanted airship they were boarded on finally arrived at Rodania. Notice of Christina and Flora's return had been sent in advance via another airship, so the harbor by Rodania's lake was packed with the nobles of the Restoration.

When Rio and Duke Huguenot disembarked with Christina and Flora, Marquess Rodan and the other nobles approached to express their joy over their safe return. Then, as they couldn't just stand around to talk, they boarded a carriage to the fortress that was being used as the consulate.

She doesn't seem to be in the crowd… Aishia would've noticed my approach, so perhaps she's in the middle of a class. It's still bright, after all.

Rio swept his gaze across the crowd from inside the

horse carriage, but he couldn't see Celia anywhere. Just as he considered that, a telepathic message from Aishia arrived.

Welcome back, Haruto.

Hi, Aishia. Rio smiled reflexively as he replied in his head. The sound of Aishia's voice was very reassuring for some reason.

Celia's in the middle of class. She really wants to see you and the princesses, but she couldn't cancel the lecture. She's very frustrated.

Aha ha, I see. We're heading for the consulate right now, and we'll be waiting for her to finish class.

Celia's lectures were also held in the consulate, so it was perfect.

Got it. I'll let Celia know.

Let's exchange some information while we're waiting, Rio proposed as he rode in the extravagant carriage with Christina, Flora, Duke Huguenot, and Marquess Rodan.

Sure. A few incidents occurred in Rodania while you were gone. I'll tell you about them.

That's exactly what I was going to ask about. When I was in the Galarc Kingdom, I heard that Professor Celia spotted Reiss in Rodania.

She didn't report every detail to the Restoration. I'll explain what happened.

Please, Rio replied with a grim look.

"Is something the matter, Sir Amakawa?"

Across from Rio's seat, Christina noticed the change in his expression. She looked at him with worry.

"No, it's nothing." Rio brushed her off with a smile and listened to Aishia's report.

Tell me the details while we're moving.

Chapter 4: Return and Reunion

Rio and the others in the carriage arrived at the consulate from the airship harbor in less than ten minutes. Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan did most of the speaking on the way, so apart from the times he was specifically addressed, Rio was able to listen to Aishia's telepathic communications.

In summary, Aishia and Celia had been living peacefully until they encountered Reiss inside the consulate one day. They chased him as he tried to flee and defeated him in a battle at the outskirts of Rodania. Though it took some time to hear the entire story due to the other conversation taking place within the carriage, Rio was caught up on the situation by the time they alighted from the carriage and entered the fortress.

So you're saying Reiss is dead? Rio confirmed as he entered the front door.

Probably. But I couldn't find his body. He disappeared without a trace after he was defeated. His presence was completely gone as well, Aishia answered a little uncertainly.

He summoned a lot of monsters before finally transforming into a monster himself, huh? And it was a monster you've never seen before, that disappeared the moment you defeated it.

Rio almost hummed out loud in spite of himself. It was hard to believe such a story. However, he had sensed a kind of creepiness from Reiss before, and it was hard to imagine Aishia lying to him.

Considering what you've just told me, it's hard to believe Reiss is human. Since he transformed into a monster, it'd make sense if he really was *a monster. But you said he didn't drop an enchanted gem when you defeated him, right?*

Rio confirmed the facts under the assumption everything Aishia said was true. If he had transformed into what looked like a vicious monster, then it was possible that Reiss was really a monster.

Monsters were creatures that left behind enchanted gems when they died, so if he was a monster, he would have left a gem. However, that wasn't the case here.

There was nothing left behind.

Which means he isn't a monster either, huh? But if he isn't a monster, then what other options are there…?

Rio thought for a long moment. He had a humanoid form, and the ability to change into the form of a monster. The only other option he could think of was…

Could he be…a humanoid spirit…? Rio reached that conclusion.

I'm not sure. Reiss's aura was closer to a monster than a spirit. But his presence is normally so weak that he almost seems like a human when he's not doing anything. It's weak enough to go unnoticed until he's right nearby, Aishia added with more uncertainty.

Spirits could sense other spirits. To be more precise, spirits could sense the spiritual auras of other living creatures. Spirits themselves had the most unique spiritual auras, so it was easiest for them to sense the presences of other spirits. This was something Dryas had taught Rio.

Which means he's closer to a monster than a spirit after all, huh… But there was no enchanted gem.

In that case, just what was his true identity? Rio found that questionable, but he didn't have enough information to come up with an answer right now.

The other thing I'm wondering is what Reiss was doing

in the Rodania consulate. Did it have something to do with Princess Christina and Princess Flora's abduction, or was it for a different purpose? Rio wondered. The two princesses had been attacked while they were on an airship, not while they were in Rodania.

I don't know. But Reiss snuck into the consulate right when the office was short staffed from the commotion of the princesses being abducted from their airship.

That was when Aishia had noticed Reiss in the middle of escorting Celia.

So it'd be natural to assume he wanted to take advantage of the commotion that emptied the consulate to do something. Did he say anything that might give us a hint?

Nope. He kept saying he hadn't meant to run into us. I think that's why he tried to flee straight away.

Reiss's true goal had been Celia, but because Lucius had acted on his own at the last minute, that truth escaped Rio and Aishia.

That part matches with the report Duke Huguenot received, I see. I was worried when I heard that Professor Celia saw a man resembling Reiss but lost track of him, but it was right to confirm the details with you first.

Celia made the report. She didn't tell him that we pursued him and fought, but she said she had to mention the fact she saw him, Aishia explained.

I see... I'm so glad you were there by her side. Thank you, Aishia, Rio said with sincerity.

It's fine. It's my job to protect Celia when you're not around.

Thank you, truly... Rio said, then paused for a long moment. *I was able to achieve my goal thanks to you. I got vengeance for my mother and father.*

Everyone really wants to see you. I'm glad you're back too. Aishia's voice echoed gently.

Thanks... I keep thanking you, ha ha, Rio said

awkwardly.

Will you be with us forever now?

Yeah. Reiss's purpose in Rodania bothers me, so I'll try and stay with you guys as much as possible.

In which case, the invitation to Rio's mansion in the Galarc Castle was a timely offer.

I'd like to gather everyone and tell them something, so let's bring Professor Celia to the stone house tonight, Rio suggested.

Got it. Shall I head over there first and let them know in advance?

Yeah. But after we meet up.

Thus, it was decided they'd take Celia and head to the stone house tonight.

"We've arrived," Marquess Rodan said from down the hallway. The party stopped in front of a certain room.

Aishia, I'm ending our telepathic conversation here. We've arrived at our destination.

Got it.

There were two female knights standing before the room they had stopped at, and they saluted Christina and the others with great emotion.

"Please enter."

One of the knights opened the door for them to enter.

The interior of the room was spacious and tidy. There were another two female knights chatting to each other on the sofa, but they shot to their feet at Christina and Flora's entrance, saluting them in a hurry.

"We're coming in," Christina said, approaching one of the many beds in the room. It was the bed Vanessa was sleeping on.

"So she still hasn't woken up…" Christina grieved with a small sigh.

Indeed, this was the ward where Vanessa was recovering. After receiving a fatal wound on the enchanted airship, she had miraculously escaped death, but she was yet

to wake up. Christina and Flora had come straight here after hearing that.

"Vanessa…"

Flora approached the bed and fretfully looked down at Vanessa's face. Vanessa was as pale as a sheet, looking as though she was literally lying on her deathbed.

"Vanessa was the only surviving witness to what went on in the airship, so she's been receiving VIP treatment here," Duke Huguenot explained.

Vanessa was a well-trusted knight of Christina and Flora's, so he was probably trying to emphasize his part in treating her courteously.

"Yes. As you can see, we've also placed her under strict security. While we'd like to hope it isn't the case, it's possible that a spy within the organization may try to silence her. Vanessa is beloved by her subordinates, so they've come to use this room as their break room just to guard her around the clock."

Marquess Rodan praised the female knights in admiration.

"I see. Then I must express my gratitude. Thank you."

Christina sighed quietly at the roundabout way Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan sought praise, then thanked the female knights in the room.

"Thank you for all you've done," Flora said too, looking at the knights. Meanwhile, Rio stared at Vanessa's sleeping face from behind Christina and Flora.

They said she's been unconscious ever since she was injured, but this is a coma, right? If so, the cause is probably damage to the brain…

He wasn't certain as he hadn't studied medicine in his past life, but wasn't damage to the brain one of the more likely causes of prolonged comas? For example, she might have bled to the point her brain function was impaired by the time the wound closed, or she might have struck her head hard while injured.

With that thought, Rio opened his mouth. “I only have a vague amount of knowledge regarding medicine, but may I ask a few questions regarding Vanessa’s condition?”

The existence of healing magic in this world meant that any wound short of a lost body part was easy to close up. Because of this, the development of medical science in certain areas was exceedingly behind. The use of *cura* was so widespread that in some regions the study of the human body’s interior functions was heavily avoided.

Thus, even Amakawa Haruto who hadn’t studied any medical science in his past life had more knowledge in certain areas than the people of this world.

“Oh? Are you knowledgeable about medical science too, Haruto?”

“Truly accomplished in everything, I see. Splendid!”

Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan immediately tried to butter up Rio.

“No, I’m honestly not that knowledgeable, but… May I ask how Vanessa lost consciousness in the first place?”

Rio looked at Christina and Flora, who had been there at the scene.

“After she was stabbed in the abdomen with a knife, she was kicked in the face and sent flying across the room.”

Christina looked back on the moment with a bitter expression.

“I see… Then, could you tell me which areas she was injured in, no matter how minor?” Rio asked next. This time, he didn’t address Christina and Flora who had been teleported before they witnessed the aftermath, but Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan who would’ve received the medical report.

“Injured areas, you ask? According to Roanna, who performed the treatment, the only area she was bleeding from was her abdomen…”

“In other words, the only area that was treated with *cura* magic was her abdomen?”

“No, after she was brought to Rodania, we had several sorcerers treat her entire body just in case,” Duke Huguenot answered, tapping a hand against his chin as he dug through his memories.

“Her entire body…” Rio thought for a short moment, then asked his next question. “May I ask what kind of treatment was done? For example, if you administered medicine or performed any other medical actions.”

“The knights would be more knowledgeable about that, as they cooperated with the doctors in nursing her,” Duke Huguenot said, looking at the knights in the room. “Well?”

“I see… We basically followed the doctor’s instructions to allow her to sleep in peace. Wiping down her body, cleaning excretions, using a tube to make sure she ingests nutrients and avoids dehydration… The doctor also said it’d be good to have someone beside her talking while she was unconscious, so we’ve been chatting to each other while in this room.”

One of the knights folded the fingers on her hand as she listed off their duties in detail.

“We considered the possibility of a curse on the knife causing her to remain unconscious and tried curse purification spells. We also considered the possibility of wounds invisible to the eye and spent several days casting *cura* and using magic potions for recovery. There was also the possibility of poison being used, so we mixed antidote magic potions into her nutrients. We thought of drawing blood to remove the remaining poison, but that idea was postponed as she’d lost so much blood when she was wounded,” the other knight added.

“Thank you for the detailed explanation. Was that everything?” Rio confirmed carefully.

The female knights exchanged a look and nodded. “Yes…”

It seems they’ve been attentively applying healing magic and recovery magic potions to no avail, so that means brain damage is causing this after all, right? With

the level of medicine in this world, they wouldn't know much about the structure of the brain and how to scan it… Assuming the brain damage is causing her to remain unconscious, what is the reason for that?

Rio looked down at Vanessa and contemplated the reason for her continued coma.

Was it because she hit her head when she was kicked away? Or, since it sounds like she lost quite a lot of blood before her wound was closed, was her brain deprived of blood circulation and damaged? Magic isn't capable of replenishing lost blood…

Perhaps she barely managed to survive thanks to her wound being neatly closed while losing an almost lethal amount of blood. Or perhaps her face being kicked in was the cause. Rio guessed it was either one of these possibilities.

The brain is the most complex part of the body… Internal injuries are especially difficult to treat, and some wounds can't be treated at all. What if the damage to Vanessa's brain is especially severe? Severe enough for several hours of regular treatment to be ineffective…

If that was the case, then…

If her brain was treated with powerful healing magic, wouldn't she be able to wake up? That possibility seemed reasonable.

The attention of everyone in the room had gathered on Rio before he knew it.

"Have you realized something, Sir Haruto?" Flora asked Rio like she was praying.

"I have no concrete evidence, but first, it's certain that she lost a lot of blood when she was stabbed in the abdomen. Does everyone here know what blood is?" Rio asked, looking around the room.

"It's a body fluid necessary for maintaining biological activity… I've learned before that the contamination of blood is a cause for many diseases," Christina answered.

That was what Rio had learned in the Royal Academy as

well. The method of drawing blood for detoxification that the female knights had referred to earlier was because of the belief in this world that drawing contaminated blood served as a treatment for disease.

Fortunately, they didn't draw any more blood from her… She doesn't have enough to begin with, Rio thought in relief.

"The reason for Vanessa's coma might be because her brain received invisible damage, either from her face being kicked or from losing a lot of blood," he explained briefly.

"Brain… You mean the part of the body within the head?" Christina asked in confusion, unfamiliar with the subject.

"Yes. She may wake up if you heal the wound in her brain with magic."

While it was mostly impossible to treat a comatose patient with heavy brain damage using modern Earth medicine, wasn't there a chance in this world where magic and spirit arts existed? Rio made his proposal with that in mind.

"Is it possible? To wake her up…"

"It seemed like she was unable to recover with just *cura* and magic potions, but the time required for recovery changes depending on the skill level of the healing magic caster, the time spent casting magic, the area treated, and the restriction of the magic effect range. Healing internal injuries is already difficult enough, but the brain is particularly complex, so it'll be even more difficult. I don't have professional knowledge either, so I can't say for sure that it'll succeed, but there may be potential in focusing on treating the head area," Rio said, explaining how healing magic worked.

For example, a light injury would take mere seconds to finish treating, but a broken bone or internal injuries would take over ten minutes for the average healer to treat. Though this varied greatly depending on skill…

“I can use healing magic. Please let me try.”

“I can use it too.”

Perhaps they had found hope in his words, as Christina and Flora eagerly offered themselves up for the healing role.

“Is there anything we can do, Haruto?” Duke Huguenot asked too.

“Please prepare a large amount of highly nutritional cold liquid foods that Vanessa can consume easily and immediately when she wakes up. It’ll depend on her appetite, but prepare some easily digestible solid foods too. Blood is created in the body by obtaining nutrition, and there’s a limit to how much she can gain from a tube. She may still be lacking blood when she wakes up, so it may be better to have her directly intake the nutrients as much as possible.”

“I see. I shall make arrangements.”

“Then let’s begin treatment as soon as the food is ready.”

Thus, it was decided on the spot that they would attempt to treat Vanessa.

“Lunch hour has just passed, so we can prepare it immediately!”

The female knights left the room in a hurry. Less than a few minutes later, they returned. Then, another few minutes passed, and one of the servants of the consulate entered the room, pushing a cart.

“Your meal has arrived.”

The cart was piled full of cold foods. It wasn’t a realistic amount someone could eat after waking from a coma—not even a bulky man could eat that much.

“That’s too much,” Christina said with a sigh.

“M-My apologies. We gave the orders in a hurry.” The female knights apologized.

“It’s fine. This should be more than enough, at least.”

“Yes, let’s begin. Princess Christina and Princess Flora, if you could make your way to the opposite side of the pillow to me,” Rio said, moving to the side of the bed furthest from

the door. Christina and Flora stood on the opposite side as ordered.

"What you'll be doing is extremely simple. I will support Vanessa's body, and you two will take turns casting *cura* on her head."

"We just have to cast healing magic on her head…?" Christina asked curiously.

"Yes. Like I said before, the inside of the human head is extremely complex. Treatment will be quite difficult, so I don't know how much time it will take. It could be a bit of a long endeavor, so please conduct the healing in turns to split the burden." Rio lifted Vanessa's head in his right palm, sliding his left hand around her to prop her up as he explained.

"I understand. Then I shall use *cura* first." Christina stepped forward first, reaching her hand out to Vanessa's head. She looked a little nervous and took a deep breath.

"Don't be nervous. I'll help too." Rio smiled to calm Christina.

Christina tilted her head for a brief second but soon made an understanding face and relaxed with a smile. "Okay… Please do."

"Ready when you are," Rio signaled.

"*Cura*." Christina recited the spell and began casting healing magic on Vanessa's head. A magic circle appeared at Christina's hand, emitting a faint light.

Right. Now I'll enhance Vanessa's physical body…

Rio casually activated his spirit arts, using his left hand to strengthen Vanessa's body and right hand to heal her brain.

Spirit arts brought about supernatural phenomena in the form of materializing the imagination of the caster. And that imagination heavily affected the results. By casting healing spirit arts with a clear image of the structure of the body and its affliction, one would be able to effectively treat complex internal injuries.

"…"

And yet, Vanessa still didn't wake up immediately.

"Let's continue with the treatment for a while," Rio urged.

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Several minutes passed. Rio and Christina were concentrating, so the rest of the room fell into silence. Flora also prepared for Vanessa waking up by holding a plate and spoon in her hands, waiting with bated breath.

Among them, Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan were watching with expressions that said "Healing magic and magic potions have already been tried extensively to no effect. Will she really wake up like this?" and an acknowledgment of "Well, let's just watch on."

There's still no sign of her waking up, but the damage to her brain should be beginning to heal. I should try switching to a spirit art that stimulates her consciousness.

Rio secretly changed the spirit art being cast in his right hand from a healing one to one that interfered with the minds of others.

He believed it wouldn't be good to use a spirit art that suddenly stimulated the brain when the damage hadn't been healed yet, so he had waited until now. But in the end, he still found it risky to suddenly and strongly interfere with the consciousness, so he kept his output rather low.

Using spirit arts to interfere with another person's mind without burdening it required a sophisticated technique, so he would leave the healing to Christina alone from here onward.

Healing magic itself required a constant and large output of magic to remain activated, taking quite a high degree of concentration. Christina's face started to sweat.

"Shall I switch with you soon, Christina?" Flora asked worriedly.

“No, I’m still fine.” Christina smiled gently to reassure Flora.

Meanwhile, Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan wore expressions tha said “Is this impossible after all?”

While focusing healing magic on the head, a body strengthening spirit art would be applied to enhance the weakened bodily functions from being bedridden, and another spirit art would be used to stimulate the awakening of the mind. In this way, they performed a high level treatment impossible for Strahl humans to recreate by using spirit arts in conjunction with magic. However, to the others around them, it merely looked like Christina was casting *cura* on Vanessa’s head, so Duke Huguenot and the Marquess’s doubts were understandable.

If this doesn’t work, I’ll have to ask Professor Celia for her assistance as well… Rio thought, when just then, Vanessa’s body trembled.

“Urk…” A groan escaped from her lips.

“Vanessa!”

“Commander?!”

Christina, Flora, and the female knights noticed and reacted strongly.

“My goodness…” Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan were wide-eyed in wonder.

“Please call out to Vanessa, everyone,” Rio directed.

“Wake up, Vanessa.”

“It’s Flora. Can you tell who I am, Vanessa?”

Christina and Flora complied immediately from beside her pillow. They repeated similar phrases over and over again, while the female knights watching on called out to her with a “Please wake up, Commander.”

After a few moments, Vanessa blearily opened her eyes.

“Prin…cess…?” she said.

“That’s right. Wake up now,” Christina yelled as she cast *cura*.

Time for the finish. I’ll strongly stimulate her mind to

wake up while strengthening her body. Rio increased the output of both his spirit arts.

“Ah… Ugh… Wh-Where…?” Life returned to Vanessa’s hazy eyes as she uttered sensical words.

“The consulate in Rodania. Do you know who I am?” Christina asked immediately.

“Pri… Princess… You’re safe…” It seemed she had a clear memory of what had happened before she lost consciousness.

“Sir Amakawa saved us. But worry about yourself right now. You were critically wounded and have been unconscious up until now.”

“Ah…” Vanessa let out a breath of relief.

“I know you just woke up, but do you have any appetite?” Rio asked Vanessa, supporting her from behind. One normally wouldn’t be able to eat at all after being bedridden with weakened organs and no ability to swallow, but a rumbling sound suddenly echoed.

“…”

Her body is being enhanced by spirit arts. It seems her digestive organs have been rejuvenated enough, Rio thought in relief. He normally used physically enhancing spirit arts in order to reduce the damage his body took or exceed the limits of moving around in battle, but by using it when a body’s functions were weakened, he was able to restore the body to a pseudo-healthy state.

“It seems like you do,” Christina sighed in relief, looking at her sister. “Flora.”

“R-Right away. Vanessa, open your mouth.”

Flora nodded eagerly and brought a spoonful of thick soup to Vanessa’s mouth.

“Mmm…” Vanessa swallowed the soup vigorously. The next instant, her eyes that hadn’t been quite focused regained their life.

“Ah, mo…” Vanessa moved her mouth, trying to say something.

“Mo…?” Christina and Flora tilted their heads.

“M-More! Give me more, p-please!” Vanessa pleaded desperately; she must have been starving.

Everyone in the room blinked in surprise.

After a brief pause, Christina broke into a gentle smile. “Feed her, Flora.”

“R-Right!” Flora’s face brightened as she brought the next bite to Vanessa’s mouth.

“Omph!” Vanessa eagerly snapped at the spoon. It was strange for a master to nurse her bodyguard, but Venessa currently didn’t have the mind or body to think about that.

“W-Wow. I’ll prepare the next bite.” Flora withdrew the spoon in a fluster, moving to scoop up the next bite of soup from the plate. Rio continued to touch the back of Vanessa’s head throughout this, secretly activating his spirit arts.

“N-No, I can feed myself! Mmgh, mmgh…!” Vanessa grabbed the plate with considerable force and brought her mouth directly to the soup to gulp it all down at once.

“Is it okay for you to be eating so fast…?” Christina asked in shock, but Vanessa’s eyes were fixed on her meal right now.

“Yes… Could you pass me that plate as well?” she said with a tremendous appetite.

Wow. I thought the most she’d be able to eat would be liquid foods, but the effects of the physical body enhancement is sure doing its work. Even Rio, the person casting the physical body enhancement, was wide eyed.

“Bring the entire cart over here,” Christina ordered with a sigh.

The servants immediately pushed the cart over. After that, Rio and the others had to watch Vanessa’s display of aggressively stuffing her mouth with solid foods, devouring them so greedily she nearly choked, and washing them down with drinks.

There was no conversation. Vanessa simply continued feverishly placing food in her mouth. Seeing her in such a

condition made everyone think that she'd be okay.

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Roughly half an hour later, Christina and Flora led Rio out of Vanessa's ward.

Vanessa had finished ingesting her required meal and was now sleeping soundly like a log once again. Since sleeping immediately after eating placed a large burden on the body, she wore an armband with a physical body spell enchanted on it. The magic essence needed to continuously power the band was provided externally, keeping the interior of the body stimulated as she slept.

Seeing how satisfied Vanessa looked as she snoozed comfortably, Christina decided there was no point in remaining in the room and suggested they head somewhere else. Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan left separately as they had information to discuss with each other.

"Vanessa sure had an amazing appetite," Flora uttered in wonder, thinking back to what had happened in the ward.

"It was astonishing. But I'm glad," Christina agreed with a relieved smile, then turned to Rio. "Thank you so much, Sir Amakawa. We keep borrowing your help, but we'll definitely repay this favor as well."

"Not at all. I wasn't the one who administered the healing."

"But you activated some kind of spell, right?" Christina asked, looking at Rio's side profile.

"Well, yes… But I cannot tell the others what I was doing, so please don't thank me for it." Rio nodded while declining her gratitude. He'd told Christina and Flora about spirit arts, but he had no intention of telling anyone else.

"Then allow me to do something personally to thank you." Christina wouldn't back down either. Even if she couldn't thank him publicly, she wanted to reward him personally.

“Please let me reward you too,” Flora immediately requested as well.

“If there’s an opportunity in the future. We have somewhere to be right now, though.” Rio changed the subject with a bit of a frown.

“Yes… We’ve just arrived. It’s this room.” Christina stopped before a certain room inside the consulate fortress.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to enter?” Rio hesitated.

“Yes. Walking around the fortress serves the purpose of spreading word that Flora and I are both alive. She may be in the middle of a lecture, but we should go inside and ask for her permission to observe.”

That’s right. Inside this room, Celia was in the middle of teaching the noble children of the Restoration.

News of Christina and Flora’s return had already spread throughout the noble class of Rodania, but actually showing their figures in public had a greater influence on morale. Since they didn’t have any immediate work to tend to, it was decided they’d walk around the fortress at Christina’s order —who also invited Rio along.

“We might as well go and observe Professor Celia’s class. Would you like to come along?” Christina had said. Celia was apparently teaching several consecutive classes today, but this would be her last one.

Aishia, we’re about to go in.

Rio sent a telepathic message to Aishia inside the room first.

Okay. Celia’s panicking, Aishia replied immediately. He had given them warning the moment the trip was decided to spare Celia from the shock, but she was apparently shaken by it.

While that was going on, Christina opened the door a tiny crack, then pushed it open while peering inside.

“Let’s go in.” Christina entered the room first, followed by Flora.

Rio went in after the two of them and the scenery of the

room entered his view. The room was an oblong shape, crammed full of students from their early to mid-teens.

Celia knew through Aishia that Rio and the others were on their way, but that didn't mean she could tell her students that Princess Christina and Princess Flora were coming. She acted as though she had no idea they were coming to observe as she stood at the teacher's podium to conduct the lecture.

However, the door had opened, so the lecture stopped. The gazes of the students flew at once to the door at the front of the room at once. Since the people that appeared were Christina and Flora, the students immediately burst into chatter.

"E-Everyone! Be quiet!" Celia slammed her palms on the podium, trying to quiet her students. She then moved away from the podium and hurried over to Rio and the princesses.

"Princess Christina, Princess Flora. And Haruto..." Whether it was from seeing the two princesses safe or from seeing Rio's face again, Celia's eyes were a little watery with emotion.

"I apologize for creating such a fuss out of the blue," Christina said apologetically.

"Not at all. I'm overjoyed to see the two of you safe. I'm sure the students are all delighted as well. But why are you here?" Celia asked, tilting her head.

"Part of the reason is we wanted to show the hopeful youths of the Restoration our safe selves... But Sir Amakawa is also with us, so we decided to come observe your lecture," Christina explained with an impish giggle. Her expression was somehow very natural, and she looked pleased.

"Is that so... Of course I don't mind, but please give me a moment to explain that to the students."

Celia blinked in wonder, then turned to look at the students. "Everyone, the safely returned Princess Christina and Princess Flora say they wish to observe our class today," she informed the room in a loud voice.

"Oooh!" The students cheered happily. They knew

Christina and Flora had returned to Rodania alive, but their main duty was to study. They had to hold back their desire to welcome them back at the harbor and instead attend this lesson, so there was no way they wouldn't rejoice from Christina and Flora coming to visit them in person. On top of that, hearing the princesses wanted to observe their class filled them with motivation.

"Quiet, quiet now! We need to show them our usual class atmosphere. There's no need to be too enthusiastic, but don't look too pathetic either, okay? Pull yourselves together without making a fuss. Understood?"

Celia clapped her hands, calling out to the students. She seemed to have stimulated their pride well with those words, as they all replied "Okay!" in unison and quieted down.

"As expected of your masterful touch," Christina said, praising Celia.

"They're all fired up to show you their best sides." Celia looked around at the students with a wry smile.

"Being able to take your lecture again, with Christina and Sir Haruto… It's truly like a dream," Flora said, sounding happy from the bottom of her heart. Rio sitting alongside Flora and Christina in one of Celia's lectures was unimaginable back when they were attending the Royal Academy of Beltrum. Rio always sat alone when he attended lectures.

For some reason… It feels like the two princesses are a little different from before.

Celia had a faintly odd feeling. That was probably because Christina and Flora were now aware of Rio's identity, but Celia didn't know that yet.

"I'm glad your dream was fulfilled, then. Now, we can't keep the lecture suspended forever, so please continue." Christina seemed to sense what Flora was feeling and smiled gently. She then urged Celia to resume the lesson.

"There are some free seats at the back, so you may sit down there."

“Thank you very much. I’ll also look back on the past while observing your lesson, Professor.”

Christina headed for the back of the room with Rio and Flora. A hundred pairs of curious eyes followed their movements with great interest.

“Say. Who is that guy? Is that man a noble?”

“That’s Sir Amakawa, I think. The honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom. The key figure in rescuing Princess Christina and Princess Flora, or something.”

The male students noticed Rio. Christina and Flora were walking around with a man their age, so it was only natural for the attention to gather there.

“He isn’t that much older than us… He already had achievements from when Princess Christina joined up with the Restoration, right?”

“He attended the party held back then too.”

“I heard he’s on good terms with Galarc’s king and hero as well.”

Some of the male students whispered to each other, wondering just how much he had accomplished when he wasn’t that far off in age to them.

For example, at the party held when Christina joined up with the Restoration, Duke Huguenot and Marquess Rodan had tried to set Rio up with young noblewomen. Due to this, Rio, who wasn’t originally well known among young male nobles, became known to some of them, and his identity was confirmed.

“Now, let’s resume the lecture.” Celia looked at Rio, Christina, and Flora all sitting in a row at the back and smiled softly as she restarted the class.

Come to think of it, it’s been four years since Rio’s watched me teach… Yeah, I have to give it my all as well! Celia thought to herself.

The same went for Rio. *I never thought I’d take one of Professor’s classes again*.

He watched Celia’s teaching figure with a pleasant

expression. Celia's appearance hadn't changed at all in the last four years, so it really was as though time had rewound itself.

I sat down as I was told to, but…

The only difference between back then and now was that he was sandwiched between people who hadn't been there in the past. If he turned to his right, there was Christina, and if he turned to the left, there was Flora. Christina was seated properly and listening to Celia talk. Flora had a cheerful grin on her face, but when she noticed Rio's gaze on her, she blushed shyly.

Right… I should focus.

Rio immediately pulled himself together and focused on the lecture.

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"And that concludes today's lecture," Celia declared half an hour later.

Normally, that would be the signal for the students to all stand at once and crowd around Celia with questions and comments—or otherwise leave the room—but today, the classroom was deathly quiet. Celia looked around and saw no one walking towards her with questions, so she timidly made her way towards Rio and the others at the back of the room.

"It was a wonderful lecture as always, Professor Celia. I feel like I've returned to my roots by hearing one of your lectures again," Christina offered to Celia once she approached.

"I'm honored, but…that's an exaggeration," Celia said shyly.

"No, it was truly amazing. I'm also pleased to be able to attend a lecture together with Sir Amakawa and Flora like this." Christina shook her head with a soft smile, looking at Rio and Flora.

“Thank you for allowing us to observe your lecture today, Professor Celia,” Flora said, joining the conversation with a spring in her voice.

“You’re welcome. I could tell you were enjoying yourself while you were listening, so I had lots of fun teaching as well.”

Celia had seen Flora grinning happily throughout the whole lesson from the teacher’s podium; it made her smile as she recalled that.

“Aha ha, it’s all thanks to you three visiting me. Oh, that’s right. There are a few kids who would love to have an opportunity to meet you. May I call them over here?” Celia suddenly asked, sensing the emotions of the students and smiling wryly at them.

“Yes, of course.” Christina didn’t know who it would be, so she tilted her head curiously as she agreed.

“Saiki, Murakumo.” Celia called the surnames of two students.

“Oh, so those two were also in attendance.” Christina understood the situation the moment she heard the surnames. Saiki Rei and Murakumo Kouta—they were the two who had escaped from Beltrum Castle with her.

Come to think of it, Rei mentioned that he’s dating a noblewoman now. And Kouta said something about training in the Restoration before becoming an adventurer… Rio recalled the last time he met them before he’d left.

“Have the two of them been well?” Christina asked.

“Yes. They both have the talent to become excellent sorcerers. They normally take the lecture with the ladies from Baron Dandy and Baron Gilbert’s houses, but… Huh? Have they left already? Saiki? Murakumo?”

No one showed up after Celia called them, so she turned to the seats where they normally sat. The gazes of all the students gathered there too.

“R-Rei, this is bad. We’re being called on,” Kouta said.

“Sir Kouta is right. You must answer when you’re summoned—especially since Princess Christina and Princess Flora are here,” Rosa added.

Rei shook his head. “Uh, no. If we go out now, we’ll definitely stand out.”

Kouta, Rei, and Rosa Dandy, who was dating Rei, all sat in a row. It seemed like Rei didn’t want to stand out in class, so Kouta and Rosa were urging him to move with hushed voices. However, he kept his head down to hide himself.

“Reacting like this will make you stand out even more, you know? It’ll only get worse the more you put it off,” a girl named Mikaela Belmond pointed out in amusement. She sat on Rosa’s other side.

“Guh… I guess I don’t have a choice. Let’s go, Kouta. You come too, Rosa.” Rei seemed to find his resolve and urged his underclassman up, grabbing the hand of his fiancée as he stood up himself.

“Wait, Sir Rei!”

“Enjoy yourselves, you three.” Mikaela saw them off with a wave.

“Why must I go as well…” Rosa murmured nervously.

The two of them do seem to be doing well. They hadn’t changed at all since their journey together. Rio chuckled to himself.

“Aha ha…” Celia laughed awkwardly.

“You both look well,” Christina said once Kouta and Rei approached, smiling in exasperation. Flora wasn’t acquainted with either of them, so she backed away shyly.

“Yes, fortunately. We’re glad you’re safe as well,” Kouta said, nodding.

“I, err, offer my sincerest congratulations on your safe return, Princess Christina, Princess Flora…” Rei placed a hand over his chest and gave a respectful noble’s greeting. His fluency was still a little shaky, but his intent was clear.

“Thank you. It was all thanks to Sir Amakawa,” Christina said, looking at Rio.

“It’s good to see you again, Rei, Kouta. I’m glad to see you in good health,” Rio said.

“We heard you saved the princesses again. You’re so cool, Haruto,” Kouta said in awe.

Rei nodded along. “Yes, yes. Sir Amakawa is truly the man of the hour.”

“Have you changed the way you speak, Rei…?” His words sounded oddly noble-like.

“Oh, well, I have to worry about how people perceive me now. My fiancée is in the process of teaching me how to speak properly. You are a foreign noble, an honorary knight equivalent to someone who holds the title of count, so if I don’t act appropriately, I’ll be scolded for it later…” Rei answered honestly, looking at Rosa.

“…”

Don’t you dare say anything strange, Rosa said with her glare.

“H-Honestly, I’m really nervous. Nobles sure have it hard.” Rei noticed Rosa’s gaze and brushed it off with a slightly panicked laugh.

“Indeed,” Rio agreed with an amused look. “If you’re engaged now, does that mean you’ve become nobility?”

“Yes. I received the title of baronet from Princess Christina. This is my fiancée, Rosa Dandy,” Rei said, introducing the girl beside him to Rio.

“I-It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Rosa Dandy. It is my greatest honor to be able to greet Princess Christina, Princess Flora, and Sir Amakawa like this.”

Rosa seemed rather nervous, but she was able to give a better noble’s greeting than Rei; a baron’s daughter would normally be too far down the ladder to ever speak with the two princesses. As an honorary knight, Rio’s status was also higher, equivalent to a count, and he was the man of the hour, like Rei had said, so her nerves were most understandable.

“I see. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Haruto Amakawa.” Rio

returned the greeting politely.

“I’ve heard all about you from Sir Rei, so, umm, it’s an honor to be able to meet you.”

“I was also greatly indebted to Rei on our journey to Rodania, so the honor’s all mine.”

“Umm, I’m pretty sure I was relying on you the whole time…” Rei muttered while scratching his cheek.

“Rosa, was it? Baronet Saiki is a good friend of the hero, Rui, so make sure you support him,” Christina said to Rosa.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness! I will make sure to do so.” Rosa bowed her head solemnly.

“I’d love to talk to you two some more, but we can’t talk peacefully here. Perhaps on a later date… Hmm. We’ll be heading to Galarc’s capital again in a week’s time. Would you like to come too?” Christina asked Kouta and Rei, having come up with the idea in the middle of speaking.

“To the Galarc capital, you say…?”

“Sure, I don’t mind…”

Kouta and Rei exchanged a look and nodded.

“All right. I’ll contact you again with more details soon,” Christina said.

“Okay,” the two replied in unison.

“Do you have time after this, Professor Celia? I’d like to speak to you, along with Sir Amakawa and Flora.”

“Of course. I don’t have any classes for the rest of today.”

“Then let’s change rooms. It doesn’t seem like the students will go home if we stay here,” Christina said, standing up. Thus, Rio and the others relocated to have their talk.

Chapter 5: Information Exchange

The group left the lecture hall and moved to a meeting room within the consulate. Christina and Flora sat on one side of a table with Rio and Celia sitting opposite them.

“So, I’ve invited the professor to talk with us because there’s a very important matter to discuss…” Christina said solemnly, glancing at Rio’s expression. Rio gave a small nod, which Flora watched with bated breath.

“And what matter is that…?” Celia straightened her posture. She sensed the heavy atmosphere from the faces of everyone present.

“The matter involves me and you, Professor. Can you guess what it is?” Rio joined the conversation by purposely calling her “Professor” while in front of Christina and Flora.

“Huh? Could it be…” Celia was terribly shaken. She seemed to suspect his intentions immediately but didn’t speak further out of fear of saying something carelessly.

“Princess Christina and Princess Flora are aware that I am Rio,” Rio revealed boldly, showing no panic whatsoever.

“R… Really? How… How am I supposed to react to that?”

In contrast, Celia was the one who reacted with anxiety. She still didn’t know what events had led to Rio’s identity being revealed, or what the fallout of knowing his identity was, so she nervously waited to hear if the story took a bad turn.

“Although we’ve learned that Sir Amakawa’s identity is that boy from back then…that is, the boy named Rio, we don’t plan on doing anything in particular about it. We are the only three in the Restoration that know this secret. And I

fully intend on taking it with me to the grave."

"Yes, we definitely won't tell anyone about Sir Rio!"

Christina and Flora both spoke resolutely.

"You two…" Seeing their attitudes, Celia sighed in relief.

"We believed it would be better to exchange information with you, so we arranged this meeting to have a discussion," Rio said.

"You could say that goal has been achieved already," Christina commented with a hint of joy.

"Indeed. However, if you have any questions or doubts, we can use this chance to clarify things," Rio stated, looking around at their faces.

"Questions… When you put it that way, a couple do come to mind… But everything's been so shocking and nerve racking and relieving that they've all blown away." Celia laughed, looking at Rio with a tired face. She'd had to process the situation repeatedly in a short period of time, so that was understandable.

"But if I were to describe my state of mind right now…I find it rather fresh. The fact that Princess Christina is saying Rio's name, the fact that the three of you who were never together at the academy are together like this now, and the fact that I happen to be present to witness it…" Celia added, her expression softening.

Flora agreed with an intense nod. "It certainly is strange hearing Sir Rio's name come from my sister's mouth. She made absolutely sure to distance herself from him at the academy, never exchanging words with him—not even mentioning his name when he wasn't there."

"That— That was because I was still immature and believed I had to distance myself from him on account of our statuses…" Christina mumbled with a rare blush.

"You did call Rio 'the boy from back then' just now. Even though he's right here." Celia giggled. Even uttering Rio's name must have been embarrassing for Christina.

"I wasn't sure how else to refer to him…"

Christina ducked her head, blushing harder. “Sir Rio” sounded a little strange, just “Rio” wouldn’t do, and “Mister Rio” was also odd. She hadn’t known know what else she could call him, so she’d chosen “the boy from back then” just to be safe.

“I’ve always called him ‘Sir Rio’! But I guess I can no longer do that now…”

Even though that was what was the most comfortable for me, Flora’s expression said.

“No matter how much I tried to stop her in the past, she always worried about him.” Christina recalled the past with a sentimental look.

“That’s because saving me inconvenienced Sir Rio so much…” Flora hung her head gloomily.

“It wasn’t your fault. I was merely too much of a heretical existence within the society of that academy.”

“That… That was because of our flaws. If you hadn’t saved me, you wouldn’t have had to enter the academy, and be falsely accused of crime at the outdoor drill… Even though Sir Rio saved me, I was helpless and unable to do anything…”

Rio acted like there was no need to worry about it, but Flora brooded over it, gradually placing more and more of the blame on herself.

“But if I hadn’t entered the academy, I wouldn’t have met Professor Celia. That would be a problem for me,” Rio said with a teasing chuckle.

Taken aback by Rio’s sudden statement, Celia blushed. “Wha…?!”

“You two were close back then too.” Christina observed their expressions.

“I tried to keep that quiet to avoid the attention of students who didn’t think highly of him… How did you notice? I even made sure we always met up in my research lab instead of anywhere else,” Celia said.

“I never saw the two of you talking intimately in front of

other students, but I sometimes caught sight of you together after class."

"I see..."

It was precisely because Christina had been so conscious of avoiding Rio that she naturally ended up looking at him more often. Celia realized that but swallowed her words, figuring Christina would be embarrassed to have that pointed out to her.

"Now that I look back on it, Christina must have been watching Sir Rio properly as well." Flora pointed it out instead.

"...You were always watching him, so I had no choice but to notice that," Christina said a little bluntly, probably to hide her shyness.

"But...it's true that Sir Amakawa was an eye-catching presence back then. He absorbed knowledge at a rapid rate for an orphan, studying diligently to close the gap with the nobles of the academy in only a short amount of time—and surpassing them. Now his sword abilities even surpass Alfred, the strongest in the kingdom. In reality, I could clearly sense your latent but prominent talent back then," Flora admitted, explaining why Rio had caught her interest at the same time.

"Surely that is an exaggeration..."

"It's the truth. You stood out so much that it makes me ashamed of how pleased I was when I was praised as a child prodigy. You excelled too much. However, when I learned of your true identity, everything suddenly made sense. That is, I'm not sure if this is appropriate to ask, but..."

"What is it?" Rio tilted his head, prompting her to continue.

"Lucius said...your mother was royalty..." Christina brought up the topic of Rio's mother, Ayame.

After a long pause, Celia reacted in shock. "Huh?!"

"Huh...?" Christina was also confused.

"I actually haven't told Celia that my mother was

royalty.” Rio scratched at his cheek awkwardly as he explained the reason for Celia’s surprised reaction.

“R-Really?! Please accept my apologies!” Christina realized she’d slipped up and apologized in a panic.

“No… Now that I think about it, Lucius mentioned that during our battle, didn’t he? I didn’t forbid you from speaking about it, and there’s no problem if Celia finds out, so don’t worry about it. I don’t believe it’s a topic that needs to be told to others. Or rather, it’s difficult to speak about, so I kept it a secret until now. But this may be a good chance,” Rio said, calming Christina down without showing any particular anger.

“Then, is it true…?”

At Christina’s words, Flora and Celia’s gazes fixed on Rio.

“Yes. My mother was royalty from another kingdom,” Rio confirmed clearly.

“Th-That’s quite shocking. So your mother was a princess like Princess Christina and Princess Flora, right…?” Celia asked nervously.

“Apparently so.”

“Apparently so… That’s a tremendous thing, though… Doesn’t that make you royalty as well, Rio?” Celia’s face twitched.

“When you put it that way, I suppose so… But I only learned the truth after leaving the Beltrum Kingdom myself, a mere one or two years ago. The fact that my mother was an immigrant and that I lived in the slums makes things a little complicated. I don’t consider myself royalty either.”

So please don’t worry about it, Rio thought, trying to brush it off lightly.

“Even if you don’t think that way, it isn’t such a simple matter. Suppose you are royalty from a kingdom that has interacted with the Beltrum Kingdom before. The things Beltrum did in the past is enough cause for an international problem. Of course, your status as a royal doesn’t change the

fact that our actions were unforgivable.”

The position of royalty in relations between kingdoms had a special value, which was what Christina had pointed out with a stiff expression.

“My mother was born in the Karasuki Kingdom, which is located in the Yagumo region. They have absolutely no relation to the Beltrum Kingdom, so you may rest assured.”

“Even so… The fact you learned of this one or two years ago means you met your royal relatives in your mother’s homeland, right?” Christina asked. In other words, could Rio reclaim his royal position whenever he wanted?

“I met my grandparents—the king and queen. But as I said before, the circumstances are complex, and I will never, ever be treated as royalty by my mother’s homeland.”

“Is that… Is that something I may ask about in detail?” Christina asked hesitantly.

Rio thought for a moment before answering. “It’s a highly confidential secret in the Karasuki Kingdom. Only the king, queen, and select others are aware of it. But there’s practically no interaction between the Strahl and Yagumo regions, so I don’t mind telling you if you keep it to yourselves. Though it may be a long story…”

“We swear we’ll never tell anyone else,” Christina declared with a severe look. Flora and Celia also nodded their quiet agreements.

“I understand. Now, where should I start…”

With that preface, Rio began telling them about his parents’ past.

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Before Rio spoke about his parents, he summarized what had happened between him leaving the Beltrum Kingdom and arriving at the Yagumo region. He believed that clarifying this would make things easier to understand.

After the outdoor drill four years ago, he’d left the

Beltrum Kingdom to head for his parents' homeland in the Yagumo region. He'd arrived there safely, but he had some trouble finding their exact village and had to move from town to town, until finally, he was able to meet a relative from his father's side.

He'd stayed with his grandmother and cousin in the village his father Zen grew up in, where he learned his father was born in the farmer's class.

One day, the warrior named Gouki, a former acquaintance of his parents who had once served his mother Ayame, visited the village. His father, who was blessed with military talent, made a name for himself through war and had been promoted to guarding Ayame along with Gouki.

Ayame was fond of Zen, but their love was a forbidden dream. One day, to settle the peace with the enemy nation, a prince came to the Karasuki Kingdom, but that had been a trap for the kingdom. As a result, the enemy prince's close aide had nearly kidnapped Ayame, but Zen had prevented that attempt. However, the enemy prince claimed it was an international problem that Zen had killed his aide, demanding Ayame be given to him and Zen executed as reparation.

The peace had been ruined in an instant, causing the noble and military houses of the Karasuki Kingdom—as well as the citizens—to explode in fury, demanding that Zen and Ayame be handed over to the enemy as demanded.

At that time, the only option left was to allow Zen and Ayame to run away and redirect the discontent onto them, resuming the war to resolve things. With that, the Karasuki Kingdom was able to set out for war once again, this time securing their victory.

However, there was no way to take back the fact that Zen and Ayame had fled. The two were treated as great criminals and left the kingdom, heading towards the Strahl region in search of repose.

"That's the gist of things… You can pretty much imagine

the rest. My parents threw aside their status and married in Beltrum, where I was born. After that, my father was killed by Lucius before I was old enough to remember him, and my mother was killed several years later, leaving me alone in the slums. That's where I met all of you, on that day Princess Flora was kidnapped and you were all searching for her," Rio concluded, wrapping up his long story.

"W-Wah..."

Celia and Flora were crying loudly.

“Umm… Hello?” Rio called out to them with a troubled look.

“That’s awful… Why… Why did such a thing…” Flora protested in tears, wiping at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“…”

Celia had her hand pressed over her mouth, completely speechless.

“I appreciate the fact you’re crying for my parents, but this happened over twenty years ago,” Rio said awkwardly.

So please don’t cry so much, he thought.

“Th-That’s wrong!”

Celia shot up from the sofa to protest fiercely.

“Wh-What is?”

What exactly was wrong? Rio tilted his head with a puzzled voice.

“I’m crying about your parents, but also about you!” Celia asserted.

“I-I see… But you already knew parts of the story already, no? How I came to live in the slums and stuff.”

He’d mentioned it in front of Christina and Flora before too.

“That’s true, but I didn’t know all of it! There were just so many sorrowful events that led to you living in the slums by yourself—like your parents’ tragic past—and you were so helpless to it all. I’m so upset! I was just living happily without a care back then…” Celia protested in tears, a tormented look on her face.

“Thank you very much… However, I’m no longer by myself. So please don’t cry. Or rather, I’d appreciate it if you stopped crying. I want you to always be laughing.”

“Th-That wording is cunning…” Celia was unable to speak any further, hanging her head. At the same time, Flora’s tears finally waned, while Christina silently watched their exchange with a slightly conflicted expression.

These two are truly tied by a deep bond…

It was painfully obvious that in the five years they had

been idly feigning ignorance, Rio and Celia had built up a strong and trusting relationship. Thus, Christina regretted feeling guilty.

During their short journey back from Paladia, she had experienced the kindness and depth of his heart. As a consequence, she had been driven by the urge to depend on his kindness. There were times she'd almost made the wrong presumption.

However, she wasn't allowed to make such presumptions. Christina bit down on her lip and rebuked herself.

Sir Amakawa's kindness is directed towards Professor Celia. That's why…

She took a deep breath, making herself the calmest person in the room.

"If I may say something?" She raised her hand to call for attention, addressing Rio and Celia.

"M-My apologies. I was immersed in the conversation." Celia felt ashamed of how much more emotional her reaction had been than Christina's and apologized in a fluster.

"No, I could see how strong the bond is between you. I think your relationship is lovely, which is why I'd like to make a suggestion."

"A suggestion?"

Do you know anything? Celia looked at Rio's face as though to say that. Rio shook his head, expressing his lack of awareness about what Christina was about to suggest.

"Back in Cleia, I invited you to join the Restoration and work in Rodania as you are now. However, I believe you should join Sir Amakawa from here onwards."

"Me…with Rio?" Celia blinked, then looked at Rio beside her.

"Yes. Your place in the organization will remain, but you may stay wherever you wish. Whether that be here if Sir Amakawa stays in Rodania, the new mansion he received in

the Galarc Kingdom, or the house Miharu and the others are living in. Of course, I'm not insisting you go out of your way to stay together with him at all times. My suggestion is for you to take more of an assistant role to Sir Amakawa." Christina looked at the two people seated opposite her as she explained the details.

Naturally, Celia was bewildered by the sudden suggestion. "Umm, this is all so sudden. It's a little confusing…"

"I know whatever I say will sound like I'm doing this out of self-interest, so allow me to be blunt. I want you to be the bridge connecting the Restoration to Sir Amakawa. It's a vital role I cannot entrust to any other noble of the Restoration, so I am requesting this of you." Christina explained her motive in a straightforward manner.

Even so, Celia hesitated in silence, unable to give an immediate reply.

"I've mentioned this to Sir Amakawa already, but there will be an increasing number of marriage proposals from the nobles of the Restoration from here onwards. However, by assigning Professor Celia the official position of Sir Amakawa's assistant, we should be able to control such proposals to a much better degree," Christina continued.

"Does that mean Celia will be a candidate for my marriage?" Rio asked.

Celia also seemed to infer that meaning and flinched in surprise.

At the same time, Flora's eyes were also wide. Christina and Duke Huguenot had discussed the potential of Celia becoming Rio's possible fiancée, but she hadn't expected that topic to be brought up here and now.

"That would depend on your relationship. I won't insist upon anything, and I won't allow anyone else to compel you either. However, in order to stop the marriage proposals from those in the Restoration, your relationship will need to be externally perceived by others in that way."

“Is that… Is that in order to pull Rio into the Restoration?” Celia asked shamefully, unwilling to do such a thing.

“I don’t know whether you’ll believe me, but I am personally firmly against using the relationship between you two for the benefit of the organization. Considering the treatment Sir Amakawa received from us in the past, I cannot allow such shameless behavior. However, the nobles of the Restoration are unaware of Sir Amakawa’s identity. Because of this, they will scheme to win him over. It is an axiom that doing so will bring the Restoration great benefit, after all,” Christina said with an ironic smile.

“While this may not be an appropriate metaphor, if I were to compare this to marriage, this isn’t the act of letting the Restoration-affiliated Professor Celia go to Sir Amakawa’s side, but the act of sending the Restoration-affiliated Professor Celia off to marry,” she continued, stressing her point.

“I-I see… I’m going off to marry Rio.”

The example of marriage made Celia blush faintly. From a noble’s point of view, there was a huge difference between leaving to marry into a family, and having someone else marry into yours.

“Once Professor Celia takes her position as Sir Amakawa’s assistant, the benefits of the Restoration will no longer have to be considered her highest priority. Her highest priority will be Sir Amakawa’s benefits, and the Restoration’s benefits will come after that. I stated just now that I want her to be the bridge connecting the Restoration to Sir Amakawa, but if conflict were to ever fall between us, she may stand on Sir Amakawa’s side and prioritize his benefits over ours,” Christina explained..

“What do you think? I plan on using the pretext of the Restoration lending its best sorcerer out as an assistant. As for what I’d like you to do for the Restoration…if you could regularly drop by to meet me, the nobles should be easier to

convince.” Christina looked at Rio and Celia’s faces.

“The assistant role is just for outward appearance, right? Based on what you’ve said, having Celia become my assistant will become an excuse to stop the marriage proposals, and she’ll be considered a candidate for my marriage.”

Rio spoke of the point he was unsure about. In doing this, Celia was liable to never be married to anyone.

“Yes. This will naturally apply if we use the assistant position as a pretext to refuse marriage proposals, and even without using it as pretext, nobles will be able to infer it.”

“In that case, I cannot agree. This is a matter that concerns Celia’s life. I am capable of rejecting the marriage proposals myself.”

“I agree that this concerns her life. That’s why I’d like to leave the decision to Professor Celia. I’m not asking for an immediate reply. If this is finalized, I’ll have to report to King Francois about it too, so I’m willing to wait if the two of you need time to discuss it further.”

“Umm… No, there’s no need for that… Princess Christina, please allow me to take the role of Rio’s assistant.” Celia volunteered for the position of Rio’s assistant of her own accord. She seemed to be nervous, as she was short of breath.

“Celia…?” Rio said, staring closely at his teacher beside him.

“I-It’s fine! This is my own decision!” Celia insisted shrilly.

“But…”

“J-Just so you know, I’m not doing this for the sake of the organization. I want to return the favor I owe you, like how you wanted to do so for me. Though I probably won’t be repaying much just by becoming your assistant…”

“That’s not true…”

“Then it’s decided. If you’re worried about my marriageable years, then don’t. I told you back in the

academy, I don't intend on getting married anytime soon."

"…"

Rio opened his mouth to say something like "you're better off getting married," or "you may not be able to marry for a while because of this," but he couldn't say anything. The words he would have perhaps uttered if he had still yet to accomplish his vengeance on Lucius didn't come out. However, he didn't know the reason why.

"Anyways, I don't want to force myself into marrying someone I'm not particularly in love with. That's why I'll wait. I'll wait forever. Even if I end up single for my whole life, I want to stay with you. Th-Though that might be a nuisance to you…" Celia vented her emotions towards Rio, who sat in silence.

"It isn't a nuisance… There's no way you're a nuisance. It's just, I…"

He wavered. All Rio understood right now was the fact he was unsure.

"Sir Amakawa seems to be worried… But I see that it is a very honest reaction," Christina interrupted. "I know my suggestion was abrupt. How about we put it on hold for now?" she asked, looking at Rio and Celia's faces.

"…"

The two of them were mindful of each other, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Flora watched them while holding her breath. She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. No, perhaps she couldn't get them out.

"In a week's time, Sir Amakawa will be returning to Galarc's capital. Professor Celia, I was hoping you would accompany him. Please use that time to think for yourself. I'm prepared to wait a while," Christina said to the two of them.

"I understand. Although…I have no intention of changing my mind," Celia calmly but resolutely asserted.

"Understood…" Rio said and nodded quietly.

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Afterwards, the group soon dispersed from their meeting.

A party was to be held tonight in celebration of Christina and Flora's return, but Rio would only be stressed over how to treat the nobles if he attended, so Christina gave him permission to not go.

Rio and Celia proceeded to leave the consulate and headed outside. The earlier conversation lingered in the air, causing the atmosphere between them to feel a little heavy.

Suddenly, Aishia's voice echoed within Rio and Celia's heads.

Celia, do you want to marry Haruto?

Setting Rio aside as the contract holder, an internal path was needed in order for Aishia to send Celia telepathic messages, so she was probably dwelling within Celia's body at the moment.

"Wha…?!" Celia squeaked, coming to a stop with a blushing face. There was no one other than Rio in the immediate vicinity, but the soldiers on guard heard her voice and noticed her.

Wait. Wh-What are you saying, Aishia?! Celia objected telepathically. Through his connection to Aishia, Rio could hear her voice as well.

Wasn't the conversation just now about that? Aisha asked curiously.

No! I mean, kind of… But not like that! Celia must have been considerably shaken, as her objection was made in a clearly flustered voice. However, it was at this point that she realized the soldiers were watching her curiously and hastily resumed walking to avoid suspicion.

Which is it, Haruto…? Aishia asked Rio this time.

Why me? he thought, startled.

By becoming my assistant, Professor— Celia might be treated like my fiancée, he answered, feigning his

composure.

Is that a bad thing?

Not exactly bad, but… Rio struggled to find an answer.

Do the two of you want to be together?

This question was probably directed at both of them.

I…would like to, Rio admitted honestly.

R-Really? Celia looked at Rio in slight surprise.

I believe it's cowardly to remain silent about my feelings, so I'm going to convey them properly. Until now, my life has been nothing but loss. I've had to watch my connections continuously be taken from me. That's why, until just recently, I only lived for my own sake… But the truth is, I haven't just been losing things. I've gained more connections than what I've lost, Rio explained.

Rio… Celia made a face like a strong emotion was welling up within her.

I never want to lose another connection again. That's why, if it isn't too late, I'd like to treasure the connections I have with everyone who has treated me well. Of course, that includes you too, Celia. You're the first connection I gained after I lost everything when I was five years old, so I want to be with you. That is what I truly feel, Rio declared.

Then you should just be together, Aishia urged.

But I know that would be selfish of me. Celia has her status as a noble to consider… I'm a coward, so I don't want to lead Celia away from her happiness just for the sake of my desire to stay together.

In short, he didn't have the resolution for it. Rio still didn't have confidence in himself because he had once lost what was important to him—what he hadn't been able to protect.

He was scared—of losing what was precious to him, of being unable to protect them. But he had already gained new cherished things…

But this was why he was anxious; he couldn't find an

answer, and his ideals were like a child's.

He was still a coward, for now. People couldn't change so easily.

You know, the happiest moments of my life were always when I was with you, Rio. Those times we drank tea in my research lab at the academy, and those times when we lived together in the stone house. Those were the times I forgot everything about being a noble and felt happiness, Celia said, expressing her feelings as well.

But there was also the part of me who was a noble—who thought I had to live for the sake of the kingdom. That's why I joined the Restoration. But…

I want to stay by your side, as both an individual, and a noble. I didn't think that was possible until now. I believed it shouldn't be possible. But when Princess Christina suggested I become your assistant, I started wondering if it was actually possible… I was so happy, I agreed with Princess Christina before I knew it.

Celia… Rio unconsciously came to a stop and stared at Celia.

A-And so, that's why… It's not like I want you to take responsibility for it or anything, okay? Y-You don't have to worry about it if other people think I'm your fiancée! Oh, but you might be worried about yourself, huh?! Celia's face grew redder and redder, her words becoming more incoherent.

Please calm down, Rio called out to her with a wry smile.

R-Right…

I know we just left the fortress, but let's go back to Princess Christina and tell her you've officially accepted the assistant role.

Okay… Celia replied hesitantly.

After that, the two of them turned around and returned to where Christina and Flora were. Their footsteps were much lighter than when they were walking away from the

consulate, and they had soft smiles on their faces that spoke of the heaviness that had been lifted from their chests.

Chapter 6: Departure

After Rio and Celia finished giving the news to Christina, they finally left the fortress consulate.

“By the way, Miharu and the others are invited to Galarc’s capital as well. I originally intended on going at night, but would you like to sneak away and visit them now? We now have more things to report to them too,” Rio suggested to Celia as soon as they were off the premises.

“Sure, let’s go.” Celia nodded readily, and with Aishia, the three of them headed for the stone house in Rodania’s outskirts.

Roughly one hour later, at nearly dusk, Rio, Celia, and Aishia arrived at the stone house. Everyone gathered in the living room, sitting in the order of Latifa, Rio, Aishia, and Celia on one side, with Miharu, Orphia, Sara, and Alma on the other side facing them.

“Mmrgh.”

Latifa however, was clinging tightly to Rio’s arm, puffing up her cheeks adorably. She had a proper reason for her anger as well.

When they first arrived at the stone house, they had all greeted each other. Latifa had still been in a great mood at this point, rejoicing over her reunion with Rio.

Afterwards came a report of the recent events. As they discussed everything that had happened after leaving the stone house up until this point, Latifa began puffing up her cheeks cutely. As Rio’s adopted little sister, she seemed to have mixed feelings about him getting close to unfamiliar princesses while she wasn’t around.

However, that much would’ve merely resulted in some mild jealousy. What she couldn’t forgive was how Christina

and Flora's rapid approach to Rio after learning his identity resulted in them learning something Latifa hadn't known yet.

"Why didn't you tell me about your mother and father?"

Her anger was over Rio's parents. After explaining that story, Rio had tried to explain how it was decided that Celia would be his assistant, but that was when Latifa attached herself to his arm and expressed her discontent.

“Sorry…” Rio apologized without giving an excuse. He had told them about his paternal grandmother Yuba and cousin Ruri when he returned from the Yagumo region, but he hadn’t mentioned to anyone that Ayame was royalty.

“Latifa, people have their own circumstances to consider. I’m sure it was a difficult topic for Rio to discuss as well. And he’s telling us now, isn’t he?” Sara said, soothing Latifa.

“I get that, but… Hmph.”

Latifa leaned on Rio’s arm, tightening her hold. She wanted Rio to rely on her more, to approach her more; that’s what she had always wanted. But he wasn’t very willing to do that, so she had no choice but to approach him herself.

“It’s true that I kept it a secret. Your anger is justified.”

“I’m not angry…” Latifa’s tone changed from a sulky one to a sad one.

“Sorry… I didn’t want to talk about gloomy things, and it was a matter that had to be kept secret, but I just used those circumstances as an excuse to run away. It’s not that I didn’t trust everyone, and it’s not that I didn’t value you all. I was just scared of closing that distance between us. That’s why there was probably another reason why I didn’t tell you like this…”

With his left hand, which was outside of her grasp, Rio hesitantly petted Latifa’s head in a slightly nervous manner.

“Onii-chan…?” Latifa looked up at Rio’s face in vacant confusion. Somehow, it felt like the air around Rio had changed over the course of their conversation.

“How should I put it? The things I’ve hid until now, the things I’ve kept to myself… From now on, I’ll try to say them if I think it’s better than running away. It may be a bit late, but I want to get closer to everyone, including you. That’s why…I won’t ask you to forgive me, but could you give me your understanding? I know what I’m saying is just convenient for me,” Rio pleaded awkwardly.

“…”

With the exception of Celia and Aishia, everyone else looked surprised.

“I-I will! I want to get closer to you too! I want to be close!” Latifa said after a pause. She leaned forward while still clinging to Rio’s arm, trying to push him down with her excess momentum. But Aishia, who was seated on the opposite side, promptly caught him with a hug.

“That kind of hurts. But thank you.” Rio smiled wryly at his inability to move, then thanked them shyly.

“He was a prisoner of his past. He knows the fear of losing someone precious, so he tried to draw a line between himself and everyone else. But now he’s trying to change,” Aishia said, giving her accurate analysis while clinging to Rio.

You really see through everything, Aishia… That made Rio embarrassed.

“Typical of Aishia… But I do think you’re clinging a little too tightly to Rio… Rio said he’s in pain. Come on.” Celia pouted sullenly, grabbing Aishia’s body in an attempt to pull her away, but Aishia had a firm hold on him.

“I’m replenishing my magic essence from him. It’s been a while, so I’m using this chance as much as I can,” she insisted.

“That’s unfair, Aishia! I want to hug him more too! I’m gonna receive his energy too!” Latifa resolutely clung tighter to Rio on his other side.

“C-Could you let go of me already?” Rio objected with a frown.

“No! I won’t! Oh, but if you sleep with me today, I’ll let you go!” Latifa giggled, acting spoiled.

“H-Hey now. What are you trying to say in the confusion of the moment, Latifa?” Sara warned in exasperation.

“Aww, do you want to sleep with us as well, Sara?”

“I-I do not!”

It had been a while since Rio last witnessed this kind of exchange between Latifa and Sara.

“Hee hee.”

“You’re blushing, Sara.”

Miharu and Orphia were all smiles, while Alma started teasing Sara.

“Aha ha…”

Rio was happy; it was like he had finally returned to where he belonged. He laughed as though he was upset, but he was smiling warmly.

“Goodness… I guess that’s how it is.”

Perhaps it was because of Rio’s expression, but Celia stopped trying to pull Aishia away and sighed gently with a smile.

“Oh? You seem rather composed today, Celia,” said Alma, who was seated exactly across from her.

Taken by surprise, Celia tilted her head. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“I just expected you to start a back-and-forth with Aishia like always,” Alma replied honestly.

“Celia’s become Haruto’s caretaker, so she’s gained the upper hand,” Aishia casually stated.

“C-Caretaker?”

“Wh-What’s that meant to imply?”

“What?! What are you taking care of for Onii-chan, Celia?!”

Miharu and the others seated on the opposite side, as well as Latifa seated on the other side of Rio and Aishia, suddenly froze on the spot and turned their attention to Celia.

“Th-That’s wrong. I’m not a caretaker; I’m an assistant! An assistant!” Celia pointed out in a fluster.

“Is that because Haruto’s more like your caretaker, always taking care of you?”

“I-I can’t deny that…” Celia had no means to refute Aishia’s puzzled question.

“More importantly! What’s the meaning of Celia becoming your assistant, Onii-chan?!” Latifa impatiently

pressed Rio for answers.

“Erm… I meant to mention this earlier, but from now on, Celia will be leaving the Restoration and staying by my side. It was more convenient for the Restoration this way too.”

“Hmm…? Does that mean Celia is free to live in this house again?”

“In short, yes.”

“Really? Yay!” Latifa rejoiced. The others were also smiling.

“However, I have a suggestion for everyone with regards to the future. It especially concerns Miharu, though,” Rio began to say, looking at the girl in question.

“Me?” Miharu blinked.

“Yes. It involves Satsuki and Liselotte as well.”

“Satsuki and Liselotte?” Miharu looked happy to hear their names.

“Yes. I’ve told you about how I was given a mansion on the Galarc Castle grounds, right? A proposal was actually made to hold a sleepover there,” Rio said.

“Sleepover?! And Satsuki and Liselotte are going too?!” Latifa was the first to latch onto the topic.

“Yeah. The Second Princess Charlotte wanted to invite you…and everyone else here, actually, to attend as well. Of course, Princess Charlotte will be in attendance, and, well, it’s possible Princess Christina and Princess Flora may participate too…” Rio explained.

“Hmm… In other words, we’ll be meeting those princesses if we attend…?” Orphia asked with a hint of curiosity.

“Indeed. Princess Charlotte has promised to minimize the contact you’ll have with the royalty and nobility within the castle. If you can’t attend, I was thinking of bringing Miharu and Celia, as well as Aishia to at least hold a shorter event…” he said to Sara and the others.

“Yes! I want to go!” She had seemed a little hesitant when she heard there’d be unfamiliar princesses there, but

Latifa was the first to raise her hand enthusiastically.

“In that case, as long as Sara gives her permission on behalf of the village for you to go, I’ll be introducing you as my little sister.”

“As your little sister…” Latifa’s eyes were sparkling.

“However, like I said before, you have Duke Huguenot to worry about, so you’ll need to think about giving an alias when you name yourself. For your family name, you’ll be using the same as mine, though,” Rio said, raising several points of concern.

“By family name, you mean Amakawa, right?”

“Right. It would make you ‘Latifa Amakawa.’” Rio tried saying it out loud.

“Yes! I’m going! I’m definitely going! I’m going to have the same family name as you! Latifa Amakawa! Latifa Amakawa! I-If I’m going to change my name, it’ll probably be Suzune Amakawa, I guess? Eheh heh… Eheh heh…” Latifa was so deeply overjoyed that she ended up entering her own world. Only Rio, Miharu, and Aishia knew that Latifa’s name in her past life had been Suzune, but she ended up saying that name out loud.

She looked so pleased with herself that Celia giggled. “You look really happy, Latifa.”

“Hmm… Sara,” Alma suddenly called out.

Sara stiffened. “I-I’m not envious or anything!”

“I haven’t said anything yet,” Alma chuckled.

“Hmm… There’s no culture around family names in the village, so it doesn’t really hit home for me. I suppose I feel a little envious at the idea of having the same family name as Rio. How about you, Miharu? You have your own family name already.” Orphia looked at Miharu beside her.

“In the country where I’m from, family names only changed after marrying. I’ve heard that some people feel happy when they marry the person they love and change their family name. I wouldn’t know myself though, since I’ve never married…” Miharu explained. She’d also heard of

some people who disliked it because of the annoying paperwork involved, but she didn't feel that was necessary to mention in this world.

"I see, I see… So for example, if you and Rio married, you'd go from Miharu Ayase to Miharu Amakawa. How does it make you feel? Happy?" Orphia asked again with an impish grin.

"U-Umm…? I-In my world, it wouldn't be M-Miharu Amakawa, but Amakawa Miharu…" Just saying that name out loud made Miharu blush bright red.

"Mhmm, I can see how happy it makes you." Orphia grinned cheerfully.

Miharu was so embarrassed she ducked her head with nothing more to say.

"Umm, the conversation's gotten rather off track, but you guys don't have to come if it doesn't seem possible. However, I do believe having the hero, Satsuki, and Second Princess Charlotte on our side will prevent unwelcome royalty and nobility from interfering. I also intend on providing as much support as I can. What do you think?" Rio steered the conversation back on topic and checked whether Sara and the others were willing to participate.

"Well… I-If it's for the purpose of studying society, it should be fine." Sara moved her tail restlessly as she answered in a high-pitched voice.

"Hee hee, it gets lonely watching the house with just the three of us."

"We were absent from the last sleepover, after all. It should be fine this time."

Orphia and Alma agreed.

"Great. Then it's decided. Departure will be in a week's time, and we'll be going by enchanted airship."

Thus, it was decided that Rio would bring all the residents of the stone house to visit the Galarc Castle.

◇ ◇ ◇

One week later, the day had finally arrived for the group to depart for the Galarc Kingdom. Miharu, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Aishia in her materialized form, Rio, and Celia made it a total of eight that were visiting the airship port in the noble district of Rodania.

They traveled to the harbor in the horse-drawn carriage that had come to pick them up at the mansion, and alighted at where Christina and the others were waiting outside the airship for their arrival. They were surrounded by escorting knights and accompanying nobles, as well as nobles who were mostly likely there to see them off. Rei and Kouta were among the latter group.

“I believe the last time I met Miharu was at the banquet, and it’s been a while since I’ve seen Sara, Orphia, and Alma. Thank you so much for the other time,” Christina said, greeting the people she knew already first. Flora wasn’t acquainted with the four of them, but she could recognize their faces.

“We’re just glad to see you’re well. Thank you for sending us to the Galarc Kingdom on this occasion,” Sara replied on behalf of their group, bowing her head with everyone else. They had been staying in Rio’s Rodania mansion from the day before, but they couldn’t allow Christina and Flora to personally visit them, so they were greeting each other for the first time here.

“I believe those two over there are new faces, yes?” Christina looked at Latifa and Aishia.

“This is Suzune Amakawa, my adopted daughter, and Aishia. I believe Princess Flora has met Aishia once before in Amande.”

Incidentally, Latifa had chosen to use her name from her past life as an alias, just like Rio.

“Yes, thank you for what happened back then. I heard Sir Haruto had a little sister, but you’re terribly adorable.” Flora nodded her head at Aishia, then looked at Latifa with deep interest.

“N-Nice to meet you. I’m Suzune.” Latifa nodded her head in greeting, then grasped Rio’s sleeve tightly. At a glance, she appeared to be acting shy, but Rio knew it was because she was frightened of Duke Huguenot beside Christina and Flora.

Based on Latifa’s reaction… There’s no doubt it was Duke Huguenot who sent her after me as an assassin.

Rio briefly glanced at Duke Huguenot.

“Yes. I’m proud to call her my sister,” he said with pride, touching Latifa’s back gently.

“Goodness me, to think Sir Amakawa had such a charming little sister. My foolish sons could learn a thing or two from you.”

Duke Huguenot displayed his forte of speaking in a highly sociable manner. Latifa’s fox ears and tail were currently hidden with a magic artifact, and that seemed to be enough to hinder him from recognizing her by her face.

“No, not at all,” Rio replied to Duke Huguenot with a cold smile.

Christina intervened to stop Duke Huguenot from speaking further. “We don’t have time to stand around talking, but just one thing: as you can see, Vanessa has recovered.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve recovered, but is it all right for you to be back at work so soon?” Rio asked Vanessa, who was standing beside Christina.

“Yes. Lying down all the time will only stiffen my body, so I’ve returned to my post as of today. It’s all thanks to you, Sir Amakawa. I’m grateful to you from the bottom of my heart.”

Vanessa bowed her head deeply. She then exchanged some words with Sara’s group, who she was acquainted with from last time.

“Please board the ship. Flora and I will entertain you all.”

The entire group moved to a parlor of the enchanted

airship. There, they mingled with Christina and Flora until they arrived at Galarc.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, in the Galarc Castle, Charlotte had invited Satsuki and Liselotte to a drawing room within the castle.

“Sir Haruto and his friends are scheduled to arrive this afternoon. Lady Miharu, Lady Celia, Lady Aishia, Lady Suzune, Lady Sara, Lady Orphia, and Lady Alma. Everyone who lives together with Sir Haruto will be coming— Oh, I’m looking forward to it so much.” Charlotte beamed in delight.

At those words, Satsuki and Liselotte realized Latifa’s name had been quietly changed to Suzune. Because she didn’t want to use an alias when meeting Satsuki and Liselotte, Latifa had used her real name when attending the sleepover at Liselotte’s home. However, at the time, it had been mentioned that she might need to use an alias when appearing in public in the future, so they immediately comprehended the situation.

“None of them will have had much interaction with the noble class, so go easy on them, Char,” Satsuki said, urging Charlotte to be considerate.

“Naturally. If they find Sir Haruto’s mansion to be comfortable, they’ll be more likely to visit the castle more. I’ve completely blocked off all nobles from attending, with the exception of my father and us,” Charlotte declared happily. “And so, the reason why I’ve arranged for us to have some time together before they arrive is because I’d like to confirm something with you two.”

She giggled and looked at the two of them with profound meaning.

“Confirm something?”

“What is it?”

Satsuki and Liselotte tilted their heads and looked at each other.

“To get straight to the point, do either of you have any intention of forming a marital relationship with Sir Haruto?” Charlotte asked nonchalantly.

“Wh-What are you saying, Char?” Satsuki nearly choked on the tea she had lifted up to her mouth and placed the teacup down on the table in a fluster.

“I asked whether you have any intention of marrying Sir Haruto.”

“No, I heard it…”

Wasn’t there, you know, more that needed to be explained than that? It was so sudden that there was no way for her to understand. Satsuki protested her approach with a pointed look

Liselotte seemed to have guessed what had caused Charlotte to say such a thing and held her tongue, reading the room.

“Liselotte will be faintly aware of it already, but the fact that her father bestowed a castle mansion to Sir Haruto is a tremendous thing. To call it an exception among exceptions would be putting it lightly, even.”

“Well, residence within the castle is normally restricted to royals, I guess.”

If she were to compare it to Japan, it would be like a commoner being given the ownership and living rights to a building within the imperial palace, Satsuki thought.

“Exactly. In other words, father is saying he wouldn’t mind welcoming Sir Haruto as royalty in the future. Wouldn’t this be the correct way of looking at it?”

Although he didn’t say it out loud… Charlotte thought.

“Haruto will become Galarc royalty…? Does that mean he’ll marry someone from the royal family?”

For example, Char, Satsuki was implying.

“I cannot say for sure, but…” Charlotte chuckled to herself.

That, or Lady Satsuki will be married to Sir Haruto, and their child will be made into Galarc royalty—it’s a

possibility, but I won't say that to her. I'd be troubled if that fulfilled the goal and removed my chance of marrying Sir Haruto, after all, Charlotte thought to herself.

"So why are you asking if Liselotte and I have any intention of marrying him?"

"Because you two are the closest women to Sir Haruto from Galarc. As I have stated before, I am enamored with Sir Haruto."

"In other words, you want us to keep our hands off Haruto…?" Satsuki suspected that Charlotte's intention was to keep them in check.

"No. High ranked and powerful nobles naturally have multiple wives, so I wouldn't say something so narrow minded. If the two of you are in love with Sir Haruto, I won't stop you from that."

"Huh…? So you want the three of us to marry Haruto?"

Satsuki was confused, having not expected the topic to turn to polygamy. From her point of view as a Japanese person, monogamy was her natural assumption of how things were.

"I don't plan on forcing you into anything—I just don't want to fight between friends. To be honest, I would be at a disadvantage if I went up against you two as rivals." Charlotte had grown up in a world where polygamy was natural, so she spoke calmly under the premise of becoming wives along with Satsuki and Liselotte.

"I-I thought this kind of talk was meant to be more muddled than this… Isn't it, like, normal to want to monopolize the person you love?" Satsuki felt an indescribable feeling of discomfort. She couldn't explain that feeling well, but she tried to do so through asking a question.

"Of course, there are some wives that act unsightly with each other in order to monopolize their husband's affection, but I do not wish to do that with you and Liselotte. I love you, and Liselotte too." Charlotte unashamedly expressed her fondness for the two of them.

“Aha ha, thank you very much,” Liselotte thanked her awkwardly.

“Hmm… I really like you too, Char, but…” Satsuki hummed to herself in anxious thought. Whereas someone else would normally feel embarrassment or hesitation, Charlotte would step forward boldly to form a personal relationship. Satsuki found that part of her fairly likeable, but that didn’t mean she was willing to share a husband with her.

“Did I say something offensive?”

“I believe I’ve told you before, but…I was born and raised in a country where it’s natural to have only one wife. I don’t know how to react when you suddenly ask me to accept being one of many wives.”

“In other words, you’d consider marrying Sir Haruto if you were the only wife?”

“Well, I guess… Wait, no, no, why are we talking under the assumption that I’m in love with Haruto?!” Satsuki’s honest personality made her imagine a future marrying Rio, but she came to her senses midway and retorted in a fluster.

“Oh, was I wrong? You seemed unusually natural when you were imagining your future with Sir Haruto, but doesn’t that mean you don’t feel any resistance to seeing him in such a way?”

Back in the day, Lady Satsuki’s desire to return to her old world was so strong that marrying someone from this world would’ve been out of the question.

The fact Satsuki wasn’t trying to reject the marriage talks with some excuse about her old world was very revealing in itself, Charlotte thought secretly.

“I-I do have objections! I want Haruto to get together with Miharu, after all,” Satsuki said in a shrill voice.

“Then you’re willing to forgo your own happiness for the sake of Lady Miharu?”

“L-Like I said, why are we assuming I’m in love with Haruto here?!”

“You say that, but in my eyes, it looks as though you think of Sir Haruto rather fondly.”

“W-Well, I don’t hate him, that’s for sure. And it’s true that there aren’t many men like him out there…but that’s a different matter to liking him as a man!” It almost looked like Satsuki had hesitated for a moment, as she strongly emphasized her point as though to convince herself.

“Hmm… I suppose that’s fine as well, but if you believe Sir Haruto should get together with Lady Miharu, that means you don’t believe there’s any issue in Lady Miharu living the rest of her life in this world. Is that correct?” Charlotte asked, suddenly changing the topic.

“I guess, yeah…”

“Then what about yourself? You said you wanted to return to your old world before, but do you still feel that way right now?” At this point, Charlotte had stopped mentioning marriage as she questioned Satsuki.

“That’s… Well… It’s not like I’ve given up on returning to Earth, nor have I stopped wanting to go home,” Satsuki answered with difficulty.

It probably started when I reunited with Miharu and the others at the banquet. Until then, the future was so unclear, and I panicked. But now that I’ve calmed down…

Satsuki had grown more accustomed to this world than she was before, and at worst…she’d be able to accept it if she had to live the rest of her life here.

“You may have to live the rest of your life in this world. If such thoughts have budded within you, wouldn’t it be better to think about your marriage partner?”

“Y-You’re going to return to that topic here? After changing the flow to let my guard down?” Satsuki’s face twitched.

“I am. Because I’m the princess of the Galarc Kingdom. If it was Sir Haruto, father would agree to it as well, so I believe he’d be a realistic choice for you, you know?” Charlotte had a truly pleased smile on her face.

“Well, I suppose, but you’re strangely insistent on Haruto…”

“That’s because it’s highly unlikely that someone better than Sir Haruto will show up in the future.”

“You sure are confident…” Charlotte’s declaration made Satsuki laugh, half exasperated.

“It’s the truth. In reality, I’d say you’d have a lot of rivals. I plan on inquiring into that at the sleepover with everyone, since it’s the perfect chance for it.”

“Keep it in moderation…”

“I will decide based on the flow of the conversation.” Charlotte smiled sweetly.

It sure is difficult being targeted by Princess Charlotte… Liselotte thought. The bitter reality of a vertically structured society meant the daughter of a duke could never defy the Second Princess. Just as she thought that—

“That’s right. I wanted to ask for your thoughts before the sleepover as well. How do you feel about Sir Haruto?” At that very moment, Charlotte set her sights on Liselotte.

“H-Huh? Me?” Liselotte flinched.

“Yes. I know you were keeping silent to prevent yourself from digging your own grave, but I won’t overlook such things.” Charlotte looked at Liselotte like an animal watching its prey.

“Right. I’m also interested in hearing how you feel about Haruto.” Satsuki jumped on the bandwagon, amused.

“N-Not you too, Lady Satsuki…” Liselotte winced.

“You’ve heard plenty about me, so I think we can hear the whole story from you before they arrive.”

Satsuki’s delighted voice echoed in the room. Elsewhere, Rio and the others arrived at the Galarc Castle several hours later.

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Several hours passed, and soon it was the afternoon,

when the sun was still up in the sky.

Rio and the others had arrived at Galarc and were on their way from the harbor to the castle grounds. The horse-drawn carriage they were riding in passed through the castle gate, setting them down inside the grounds.

“Welcome, everyone. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Charlotte, Satsuki, and Liselotte were waiting. They had received advanced notice before their arrival, so they had been standing outside. Satsuki spotted Miharu and gave her a small wave. Miharu smiled happily in return.

“Thank you for personally meeting us. It’s good to see you again, though it hasn’t been that long since we last met.”

Christina greeted Charlotte on behalf of the group. They had been away for a week, so it wasn’t really that long at all.

“I was waiting impatiently to see everyone as soon as possible, so it felt extremely long to me… I’m sure there’s much to talk about, so let us all move to Sir Haruto’s mansion right away. My father will be present in the beginning just to greet you, so if Princess Christina and Princess Flora could come along…? With the exception of the minimum number of attendants, all others are asked to stay away,” Charlotte said, selecting only Christina and Flora from the Restoration and prompting them towards the mansion, along with Rio and the residents from the stone house.

“I understand.” Christina glanced at Rei and Kouta, who had accompanied them there, then gave her orders to the rest of the Restoration members led by Duke Huguenot. “Flora and I are being summoned to Sir Amakawa’s mansion. I will contact you later, so head inside the castle first. I’m leaving things to you, Duke Huguenot.”

“Understood… Let us go.” Duke Huguenot bowed his head, then left with his followers.

This left Rio, Miharu, Celia, Aishia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Christina, and Flora remaining behind. Facing them was Charlotte, Satsuki, Liselotte, and guards from the Galarc

Kingdom.

“Follow me,” Charlotte instructed, leading the way to Rio’s mansion.

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After that, some simple greetings were exchanged between those who hadn’t seen each other in a while before they arrived at Rio’s mansion.

A very small number of attendants—including Vanessa—went through the door to stand by the lounge. Once Rio and the others entered, those waiting by the lounge bowed their heads respectfully. Among them were Liselotte’s attendants, including Aria. Rio’s group opened one of the doors in the lounge and went through the door. It led to a meeting room roughly fifty meters in size.

“Oh, father. You’re here already?” Charlotte said. King Francois was seated on a sofa, waiting.

“Yes. Since I was going to be here anyway, I thought I’d take a brief tour of the mansion before Haruto begins living in it for real,” Francois replied.

“Come to think of it, you used to live in this estate before inheriting the throne, right father?” Charlotte commented in understanding.

“I-Is that true?” Rio was shocked to hear that Francois had lived in the building before.

“The building isn’t too old, so it shouldn’t have any defects, but if you find anything you dislike, you may speak to Charlotte and remodel accordingly,” Francois said to Rio.

“I shall live in it gratefully…” Rio placed his right hand over his chest and lowered his head at Francois respectfully.

“Indeed. Now, I shall be on my way.” Francois nodded deeply, then stood up.

“Oh my, are you leaving already?” Charlotte asked.

“My presence will only prevent any lively conversation from taking place. Just being able to see your faces is enough

for today. If there's a later chance to speak again, we can do so then."

With those words, Francois briskly started walking.

"As expected of the king."

Having witnessed the consideration of one who stood above others, Satsuki muttered in awe of how fast Francois had excused himself.

"Now, please seat yourselves wherever you like. Let me preface this by saying there'll be no standing on ceremony today, as I wish to drop all pretenses with everyone."

Charlotte made her suggestion with a friendly smile, hoping for the party to be relaxed. In reality, Celia and the spirit folk girls who were unfamiliar with Charlotte lowered their guard a little at her words.

"Now then, Sir Haruto shall sit beside me."

Charlotte suddenly made the first strike. She boldly entangled her arm around Rio's and led him to a three-seater sofa, where she sat him down.

"Wha...?!"

The residents of the stone house all raised their voices together, eyes wide.

"I want to sit beside Onii-chan too!"

Among them, Latifa was also quick to move. She secured the seat on the other side of Rio.

"Hee hee. I wanted to talk to Lady Suzune as well, so that works out perfectly," Charlotte said, smiling as she used Latifa's alias.

"It seems like I have lots to say as well," Latifa replied, lightly puffing up her cheeks.

"Why, I'm pleased to hear we'll get along well. If it's Sir Haruto's little sister, then I'm sure we'll be interacting with each other for the rest of our lives. Hee hee."

Charlotte's carefree smile didn't waver.

"Hee hee hee."

Latifa also giggled undauntedly.

I... I want to change seats... Rio thought to himself,

feeling an odd pressure from both sides.

“You sure act fast, Char.”

“Aha ha… Shall we sit too, then?”

“Yes, let’s. Everyone, please sit down. This is an informal gathering, so don’t worry about your seating order. Right? Miharu, come sit beside me.”

Satsuki and Liselotte looked at Rio sandwiched between the two of them and smiled wryly. Then, at the suggestion from the hero to sit wherever, the party seated themselves.

“Okay. Want to sit with me, Ai?”

“Okay.”

Miharu sat beside Satsuki as suggested, and Aishia sat beside her.

“Then we’ll sit on the opposite side.”

Sara, Orphia, and Alma sat on the opposite side of Miharu and Satsuki. That placed them at the end of a U shape with Charlotte, Rio, and Latifa. Meanwhile, Celia, Liselotte, Christina, and Flora were still standing.

“Then if you don’t mind, may I sit beside you, Princess Christina?” Liselotte asked Christina.

“Of course.” Christina immediately nodded. Thus, Liselotte and Christina took the seats beside Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

“Princess Flora, we can sit on the opposite side of Princess Christina.”

“Okay, Professor Celia.”

Celia and Flora sat down facing Christina and Liselotte, beside Aishia, Satsuki, and Miharu. As a result, everyone was seated, forming a long U shape with Charlotte, Rio, and Latifa as the base point. The table was lined with snacks and tea already, so the preparations were complete.

“Now that everyone’s seated, allow me to give a brief greeting as representative of the Galarc Kingdom and the host of this gathering.”

Charlotte looked around at everyone, then got to her feet to make a speech. Everyone’s gazes naturally gathered on her.

“This is just a feeling, or perhaps my own wish, but I believe I’ll be seeing everyone here more often through Sir Haruto. After all, I’m meeting everyone here right now thanks to him,” she continued.

“…”

Everyone looked at each other. Indeed, they wouldn’t have met each other without Rio.

“There’s a hero, princesses, a duke’s daughter, and a count’s daughter here today, but status does not matter. The people who have connected to Sir Haruto have gathered here regardless of country borders. I believe that is something wonderful. That’s why I would love to use this opportunity to deepen my friendship with everyone. Let’s have fun talking to each other and mingling together. It’s an honor to be meeting you all.”

Charlotte spoke eloquently, like a true woman of royalty, ending her speech with a courteous bow.

Sara was the first to widen her eyes and return the bow. “It’s nice to be able to meet you too.” She and the other spirit folk girls were taken aback by the way Charlotte had immediately taken the seat beside Rio, but they were impressed by how she could act like a proper royal too. Following her lead, Orphia and Alma bowed, as well as the others around them.

“That should do for greetings. Shall we begin?”

Thus, the tea party at Rio’s mansion commenced.

Interlude: Beltrum's Heroes

In the Beltrum Kingdom's capital, Beltrant, and inside the royal castle…

"Are Kouta and Saiki doing well…? Haruto too…"

The hero that had been summoned to the Beltrum Kingdom, Shigekura Rui, gazed in an east-northeast direction while murmuring to himself. That was the direction of Marquess Rodan's territory where the Restoration headquarters were located, as well as the Galarc Kingdom.

It's so frustrating how there's no way of confirming the safety of people who live far away…

Rui sighed listlessly.

For some reason, I've been feeling down lately…

Rui shook his head, knowing there was no point in feeling that way. However, he was driven by the impulse to sigh heavily in spite of that.

This country is eerie…

It was difficult to express in words, but it was like there was a deep, deep darkness swirling around the castle.

I wonder what it is. This uneasiness in my chest isn't fading at all…

With a slightly stiff expression, Rui looked down at the city around the castle. Just then, a girl appeared behind Rui, calling out to him.

"Rui?"

Rui turned around and replied to the girl—his lover. "Hey, Akane."

"What's wrong? Why are you gazing outside?"

"I was just thinking. About Kouta and stuff."

"I see…" Akane's face was tinged with a little bit of

sorrow and understanding. “Kouta should be doing well. He has Saiki and Haruto. We might be able to go see them one day.”

“Yeah.”

The two of them exchanged gentle words, gazing at the sky that connected to Galarc.

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Meanwhile, back in Galtuuk, the capital of the Galarc Kingdom…

Some time had passed since Rio and the others began their tea party in his mansion. Saiki Rei and Murakumo Kouta were walking down a corridor of the castle, following Duke Huguenot.

“I believe you have heard from Princess Christina in advance, but we’re about to head to Sir Hiroaki’s room. I will leave immediately after greeting him, but we’d like the two of you to interact with him more,” Duke Huguenot explained as they walked.

Indeed, the reason why Christina had brought Kouta and Rei to the Galarc Castle was for them to become friends with Hiroaki, if possible.

Hiroaki hadn’t seemed too enthusiastic about making friends with people from his hometown, only talking to them briefly when in large gatherings. But Christina believed it would be better for him to have friends of the same sex—all the more so if they could talk about their hometown together. The two were the perfect candidates for such a role.

“I understand. I’m just a little nervous.” Rei, who now had the status of a baronet, had a slightly stiff expression.

“Ha ha ha. Well, there’s no need to worry. It won’t be a problem if Sir Hiroaki’s mood is soured a little here and there. I’m sure there are things about his hometown only you can talk to him about, so it’d be great if you could take

this chance to become friends."

And so, the party reached Hiroaki's room while discussing such things. The knight on guard outside the room announced their arrival, and they entered to see Roanna and Hiroaki seated on the sofa inside.

"Oh, long time no see, Duke Huguenot. And Rei and Kouta are here too…?"

Hiroaki remembered their names and faces as they were some of the few people from the same world as him, and members of the same organization.

"It's been a while," Rei said. Kouta also bowed his head.

"Yeah. But you look like you've been good. So what's up?"

The fact he immediately wrapped up their reunion and asked for their business showed that they were still merely acquaintances at the present.

It must be thanks to Roanna. He's in a much better mood than one week ago, Duke Huguenot thought, seeing Hiroaki's attitude. That being said, one mistake in their actions could upset him again.

"Rei has been given the title of a baronet and officially joined the Restoration. Since he's from the same hometown as you, I brought him here to greet you formally."

Christina had warned them that Hiroaki might not be happy to hear that they brought people to be his friends, so Duke Huguenot relayed that explanation instead.

"Oh? So you became a baronet."

"Yes. I started dating a lady from a baron family with the intention of marriage."

"Hmm." Hiroaki showed some interest in that, grinning faintly.

"Rei's future would be more secure if he could get closer to you, Sir Hiroaki. Since you've all gathered already, you should chat among yourselves about your hometown. I will excuse myself in the meantime."

With those words, Duke Huguenot left the room. He had

managed to butter Hiroaki up in a casual way, making him snort in a pleased manner. This left Hiroaki, Roanna, Rei, and Kouta alone in the room.

“Well, have a seat. It might be nice to talk to some people from the same world every once in a while. The other Japanese guys have been kind of jerks, but you two don’t seem like that,” Hiroaki said.

“Then, if you don’t mind. Let’s sit down, Kouta.”

“Right, excuse us.”

Rei and Kouta sat on the open sofa.

“Hiroaki… Wait, perhaps I should call you Sir Hiroaki?” Rei was about to start speaking, then paused to wonder about how to address Hiroaki.

“Oh, I don’t want to be addressed so stiffly by a fellow Japanese person. Just ‘Hiroaki’ is fine.”

“All right. Then, Hiroaki. It’s a little embarrassing facing other Japanese people like this when we’re in another world.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Hiroaki agreed.

“Is that how it’s meant to be?” Kouta didn’t seem to get it.

“It is. It’s like, you’ve finally been brought to a new world to enjoy yourself, so meeting other Japanese people is like suddenly being dragged back to reality,” Rei said.

“Yeah, exactly. Totally relatable.” Hiroaki agreed strongly again with this, pointing at Kouta.

“Kouta actually met Miharu for the first time today. He was so flustered greeting her,” Rei said.

Rei and Kouta had only met Miharu for the first time today, and they had given her a brief greeting on the way to Galarc.

“I-I was not.”

“No, no, you were being really shy in front of her.”

“That’s because…she was cute. Like a celebrity,” Kouta admitted reluctantly, blushing.

“Oh, Miharu’s the one staying with that bastard Haruto,

right? Well, I guess she's one of the prettier ones even for this world, but…" Hiroaki looked like he wanted to object.

"Not your type, Hiroaki?" Rei asked with a grin.

"More like, a pretty Japanese girl just doesn't have as much impact in a fantasy world. It just doesn't interest me. If you come to a new world, you want to find a pretty girl from that world, right? It'd be like ordering shoyu ramen at an Italian restaurant."

"Yeah, good point. We're in a different world now, so why would you aim there? I totally get it."

"Well! You might actually be worth talking to, huh?" Hiroaki was extremely pleased.

"I was a pretty avid reader of those isekai web novels that were all the rage. From what it sounds like, you were too?"

"Oh, well, I guess. It's a little embarrassing, so keep this between us…but I wrote some as well."

"Whoa, really? I might have read it before! What was your work called?"

"No, I said it's embarrassing. But I suppose it did get some good reviews."

And so, the conversation between Hiroaki and Rei grew more lively.

I-I have no idea what they're talking about… thought Kouta. Even as a fellow Japanese person, Kouta hadn't dipped his hands into that sub-genre of pop culture.

I'm surprised. I didn't think Sir Hiroaki would have so much fun talking to a boy his age. Roanna didn't know what they were talking about either, but she was astonished to see Hiroaki in such a good mood chatting with someone his age.

"So isekai are usually split into the reincarnation type and the transfer type, but which type did you like?" Hiroaki asked Rei.

"I love both of them, but just before I came to this world, I was obsessed with the gourmet genre."

"Oh…? Ah, the gourmet-type isekai jumped on the

bandwagon late and became oversaturated, after all."

Hiroaki's brow twitched in interest at something.

"Right. There were works that tried to be original among them, like that one where the isekai heroine wandered into Japan and walked around eating with the main character. I bookmarked it because it was interesting, but I came to this world before I could finish reading it, which was frustrating."

"Seriously? What was the title?"

"It's a little embarrassing to say this in front of Roanna—Oh, I can just say this part in Japanese. It's called *The Modern Gourmet Tour with a Loli Hag*." Rei had been speaking the language of this world since they were in front of Roanna, but he gave just the title in Japanese.

"Wha— What's up with that ridiculous title?!" Kouta choked in surprise.

Roanna tilted her head in confusion.

"I haven't read all of it, but I heard it's a masterpiece. The setting switched between Japan and the other world to avoid cliche situations. It was good enough to be published, I reckon," Rei said passionately.

"Rei... You really do know your stuff. No, you're actually a genius, aren't you?" Hiroaki beamed with his whole expression, praising Rei excitedly.

Thus, Hiroaki became friends with Rei and Kouta, exactly as Christina had planned—or perhaps even better than she had planned.

Chapter 7: Tea Party Turbulence?

Meanwhile, lively conversation was also taking place elsewhere in the Galarc Castle, at the tea party being hosted in Rio's estate.

It was a gathering where multiple people had never met each other before, but even they were able to chat with each other happily, as Charlotte was able to bring them into the conversation naturally.

Before they knew it, an hour had passed and the awkward atmosphere had pretty much dissipated. They weren't the best of friends with each other yet, but even people who only just met each other were able to interact without reservation.

The current topic was Rio's cooking skills.

"Hmph, it's so unfair everyone else here has tried it. I wish to try Sir Haruto's cooking as well," Charlotte said with a pout.

Sir Haruto, Sir Haruto. Please cook for me as well, Charlotte pleaded with her gaze.

"I'm not that great at it, but…if you'd like, I could make one dish for dinner tonight?" Rio suggested to Charlotte, scratching at his cheek.

"Really?!" Charlotte brightened dramatically.

"Sure. I'll go now to check the pantry for ingredients that I can use. I'll talk to the chef and see if they can handle the preparations too," Rio said, standing up from the sofa.

"Do you need help, Haruto?" Orphia and Miharu immediately offered, being that they were the best cooks of the group.

“No, I was the one who accepted Princess Charlotte’s request. You should stay here and relax. I’ll return in an hour or so at the earliest.” Rio declined and left the room.

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The door shut behind Rio as he left, closing with a snap.

“I suppose now is the perfect time. While Sir Haruto is away, I’d like to ask everyone something,” Charlotte suddenly said, looking around.

“What is it?” Christina asked first.

At that, Charlotte’s eyes sparkled in delight. “What kind of a relationship does everyone want to have with Sir Haruto in the future?” she asked all the girls present.

“…”

Most of them were startled, and the room fell silent.

“I’ll answer! I want to be with Onii-chan forever!” Latifa replied, raising her hand first.

“As his little sister, you mean? I thought you weren’t related to Sir Haruto by blood…”

“As both his little sister, and…a woman…!” Latifa didn’t falter under Charlotte’s calculating gaze. She answered her boldly.

“I’m going to be with Haruto forever as well,” Aishia said.

“You mean that in the same way as Lady Suzune, as a woman, right…?” Charlotte asked to confirm, tilting her head at Aishia’s words. She probably couldn’t imagine someone purehearted like Aishia in an intimate relationship with Rio.

“I am a woman, you know?” Aishia also tilted her head curiously.

“Mm, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m asking if you want to be in a relationship with Sir Haruto as a man and woman. Like marrying and raising a family. Do you want to be with him in that way?” Charlotte asked her question again, this

time saying more to explain her intentions.

“No matter the type of relationship, I will remain by Haruto’s side. As long as he wants me there.”

“I see…” Impressed by something, Charlotte’s eyes widened in wonder.

“What about everyone else?” she asked the others once again. But no one replied after Latifa and Aishia.

Miharu, Celia, Satsuki, Liselotte, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Christina, and Flora all fell silent.

“Hmm, I see. That means the only ones with clear affection for Sir Haruto are Lady Suzune, Aishia, and myself.” Charlotte looked around at everyone in confirmation, before casually revealing her own feelings for Haruto.

“Come on Char, you can’t put people on the spot like that. No one understands why you’re asking such a thing,” Satsuki protested with a sidelong glance at Miharu.

“Oh my, you’re right. It seems I was overeager. There are some people here who’ve known for a while now, but as I just said, I am in love with Sir Haruto as a member of the opposite sex and would like to marry him if possible. Thus, I wish to know how the women around Sir Haruto feel about him,” Charlotte said in a clear voice.

She definitely omitted the explanation on purpose.

Satsuki narrowed her eyes at Charlotte. She had probably tried to surprise them in order to sound out their reactions. Satsuki was able to understand her fairly well now.

“I’m extremely pleased to have obtained the information that Lady Suzune and Lady Aishia are clear rivals. Though I don’t know how everyone else feels…”

Charlotte grinned as she looked around at the faces of those who didn’t answer, probing further into their reactions. Christina, Orphia, Alma, and Liselotte maintained their poker faces, but the others had expressions that implied they had some feelings for Rio. Her eyes were sharp

enough to spot that much.

I don't know about Princess Christina, Lady Orphia, Lady Alma, and Liselotte, but there's no doubt the others feel affection for Sir Haruto.

Charlotte giggled in a show of joy. "I'm sure Sir Haruto will receive lots of marriage proposals from now on, so I highly recommend those of you hiding your feelings to become more honest with yourselves soon," she said to fluster those who hadn't answered. They remained silent, but they each had slightly more panicked looks on their faces. Charlotte observed all their reactions and beamed in delight.

Well, I don't doubt father will repel most of those proposals, though. But since she had said that to incite their sense of panic on purpose, she wasn't about to reassure them with that information.

"Is this a declaration of war, Princess Charlotte?" Latifa asked, eyes burning with a sense of rivalry.

"You don't need to call me by my title. I'm one year older than you, so I don't mind if you call me Char, as if I were your big sister. I may really become your older sister for real one day." Charlotte seemed to be truly enjoying the situation, grinning so widely she had to control her facial muscles from loosening.

"Hmph. Please answer me, Princess Charlotte." Latifa urged her to answer, puffing up her cheeks.

"If Sir Haruto only chooses one person, then it'd be a declaration of war, I suppose. However, since that isn't the only possibility, I'd like to form a cooperative relationship with you, with consideration for the future."

"What other possibility…?"

"Polygamy. In other words, Sir Haruto marrying multiple women. But in that case, there'll be limited positions available for the wives, so there may be competition there instead."

Despite saying she wanted to form a cooperative

relationship, Charlotte made sure to add an extra comment to stimulate a sense of panic, as she seemed to find things more fun that way.

"Hmm... I don't think Haruto's the type who can accept polygamy," Satsuki muttered.

"Why do you think that?"

"He's too awkward to do that kind of thing, don't you think? I reckon once he falls for someone, he'll love only that person until the end."

"I think so too. That part of him is wonderful, isn't it?" Charlotte sighed dreamily.

Latifa nodded in agreement. Meanwhile, Celia, Sara, and Flora also gave small nods at Satsuki's words.

"Umm, if you think so too, then there's no point in continuing under the assumption he'll marry multiple wives, is there?" Satsuki said tiredly.

"No, no, there's still the chance he'll come to accept the idea of marrying multiple wives." Charlotte was extremely optimistic.

"Well, it's not like I know what Haruto's thinking. I'm just guessing." Satsuki sighed as though to expel her worries.

"Sir Amakawa did say that he was opposed to the idea of multiple wives," Christina offered.

"Oh my, is that so? I would love to hear more about that," Charlotte said, immediately latching onto that information.

"Anything further would involve Sir Amakawa's own intentions, so I'm afraid I can't say anything more than my surface impression."

"I'm very, *very* curious, but I suppose there's no helping it." Charlotte pouted but accepted Christina's troubled refusal with reluctance.

"Realistically speaking," Charlotte said, moving on to a new topic, "if he were to only choose one wife in a monogamous relationship, I don't have much confidence in being picked. Is that the same for everyone else? Unless

there's someone here who already has that kind of relationship with Sir Haruto…"

"Hmph…" Not even Latifa could reply boldly right away.

The others were also silent.

"It seems like no such person exists yet, so I'm very relieved. That means I still have a chance, after all," Charlotte said brightly. "However, the problem lies in whether Sir Haruto actually sees us as members of the opposite sex. In my opinion, Sir Haruto is a rather late bloomer in that sense, and at the same time very gentlemanlike, so he never shows any sign of ulterior motives," she added with a gloomy look. There was no way for her to know if she was being seen as a woman like this.

"You understand him well, Princess Charlotte…" Latifa was impressed, shooting Charlotte a look of acknowledgement. She realized she couldn't underestimate her as a rival in love—with the potential that she was a dark horse.

"Thank you very much. I wasn't born and raised as royalty for nothing. It pleases me to hear that from his adopted sister." Charlotte thanked her with a charming grin.

"Even when he's around the people he's close to, he doesn't do anything to close the distance himself. But that seems to have changed a little since he returned from his journey… Until now, we've always had to be the one proactively approaching him if we wanted to close the distance. Even then, I don't know if he sees us as members of the opposite sex." Latifa seemed to have her own thoughts about that, as her expression was rather conflicted.

"Is that so… In that case, it seems we should set aside the polygamy talk for now and first confirm whether Sir Haruto actually sees us in that way."

Charlotte started devising a plan to capture Rio.

"It's not as simple as that, though…" Sara joined in the conversation with a look of determination.

"He's afraid of losing his connections to people. It's not

that he hates connecting with people. I believe there's a latent part of him that fears getting too deeply involved with others." Celia also gave her analysis of Rio in a natural manner. She spoke in reaction to Sara's response, but it wasn't as though she had been triggered to do so.

"This has been extremely enlightening." Charlotte looked delighted at the flow of conversation.

"If you want to get close to Onii-chan, you have to proactively press him. You can't hold back at all, not even in the slightest."

Latifa pointed out the most vital point in getting close to Rio. Although she wasn't active in the conversation, Flora was also listening with a serious look of contemplation. Beside her, Christina and Liselotte were also listening in interest.

Everyone likes Haruto... I know she said as much the last time we left the castle, but Princess Charlotte is serious about Haruto as well... Miharu was also an introvert, so she had remained silent until now, but she had many thoughts going on inside of her. Like the others present, the atmosphere in the room was beginning to agitate her.

After the banquet, her feelings for Rio had been unintentionally revealed when Takahisa nearly kidnapped her. But nothing had changed in their relationship since then. She was fine when they were together in a large group, but when she was alone with Rio, she'd remember how he was aware of her feelings and become too embarrassed to function. Besides, they had spent most of their time apart after the banquet.

I can't just stay like this, can I? Miharu thought with renewed enthusiasm. Rio had said they'd have more time together from now on, but she was faintly aware that their relationship wouldn't change at the current rate.

Yeah. I can't run away just because I'm embarrassed. Because I'm in love with Haruto as well... Miharu strongly recognized the need for change. Because she loved him—she

was in love with him. Not only with the Amakawa Haruto from Earth, but with the Rio of this world too. That's why she had no intention of giving him up to someone else. She didn't want to. Charlotte had stimulated her sense of danger and made her recall how she'd felt during the banquet.

"I have one suggestion I'd like to make," Charlotte said, as though she had been waiting for the right moment. Everyone's attention gathered on her.

"In order to confirm whether Sir Haruto sees us as eligible women, how about we use today to plant a trap?" Charlotte proposed.

"Are you assuming that everyone here's in love with Haruto?" Satsuki interrupted with an unimpressed look.

Everyone who's lived with Haruto aside, Princess Christina and Princess Flora are here as well, you know? Satsuki looked at the two of them as though to say just that.

"No, of course I'm not assuming that. That's why participation will be purely optional. If you like Sir Haruto, feel free to join in. Of course, if you have other motives…for example, if you want to join because you find it interesting, I won't mind either," Charlotte replied clearly.

"I see… But what kind of trap are you planning?" Satsuki asked.

"Let's see. The most direct approach would be to bring up the topic of love in front of Sir Haruto, I suppose. For example, we could ask him which one of us is his type… That may be interesting to witness."

"Do you think Haruto would answer that?"

"Indeed, Sir Haruto would probably be on guard if I asked such a thing in front of everyone else. In which case, it may be more realistic to have the people here form small groups and visit Sir Haruto to talk to him. That being said, it'd be extremely unnatural if we visited him in succession to talk about love, so we should come up with different topics once we've split into groups. Also…" Charlotte placed her hand over her mouth in thought. "It may be better to have

those who don't need to know if Sir Haruto sees them as attractive to participate, actually. It'd be better camouflage. Let's treat this as an event in order to deepen our relationship with Sir Haruto. There are things we'll only be able to say because of the atmosphere here right now," she said in summary.

"I think that's a great idea!" Latifa immediately agreed.

"Thank you. Anyone else? If anyone would like to sit out, please raise your hand."

"…"

No one raised their hand.

"Then let's decide our groups and what we'll talk about before heading to Sir Haruto."

And so, an event to deepen their relationships with Rio was secretly hosted without the man himself present.

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Half an hour or so later, Rio was preparing dinner in the kitchen. It was quite rare to see a noble cook, so the servants of the mansion that were off duty were watching him curiously. Among them were Liselotte's attendants, including Aria and Vanessa.

Rio looked a little uncomfortable with being at the center of so much attention, but his skills were still exquisite enough to impress his spectators.

Incidentally, the dish he was making was a rice-style croquette using barley as the main ingredient. He made an elaborate sauce and added risotto-style seasoning to the barley.

Okay, that's the preparation done.

All that was left was to fry it in oil before they ate. He had prepared plenty of ingredients so that there would be enough for a large number of people. The ingredients that couldn't be exposed to open air had been placed in a bowl and covered in wrapping paper, then moved into a

refrigerator powered by sorcery.

“Haruto.”

Satsuki’s voice echoed in the kitchen, and Rio turned around at the sound of his name being called.

“Hey, Satsuki—and Orphia, Princess Christina, and Princess Flora…”

Rio was somewhat surprised by the four people standing at the kitchen entrance. He called their names as the spectating servants made a quick and clean exit.

“Hey! Did we surprise you?” Satsuki said with a slightly awkward expression.

“Not surprised, but it’s just strange seeing the four of you together. Did something happen?”

“Nah, it’s just that we rarely get a chance like this, so we were talking about taking some time to group up in unusual combinations.”

“I see. I think that’s a great idea.”

“Are you still in the middle of food prep? Would you like to talk to us for a bit?”

“I just finished up here and was about to return to everyone anyway. Sure,” Rio agreed readily.

“Then let’s go to the dining room over there.”

“All right.”

And so Rio and the girls moved from the kitchen to the connected dining room. The five of them sat down at one corner of the enormous dining table that could seat thirty people.

“Sorry for making you cook by yourself, but the food you make is truly delicious, so I’m really looking forward to it!” Satsuki said to Rio.

“It’s no problem. Princess Charlotte was the one who requested it, and I like to cook. It was strange for me to be the only man in that room anyway,” Rio replied with a faintly strained smile.

“I don’t think that’s true. Right?” Satsuki asked Christina, Flora, and Orphia.

“While you were gone, everyone was talking about how they wanted to talk to you more. That’s why we came here,” Orphia replied first.

“Indeed. Everyone adores you,” Christina said, smiling.

“Yes. I also wanted to talk to you more…” Flora said shyly.

“If that’s true, then I’m honored.” Rio looked embarrassed.

“That aside, what were you making just now?” Christina asked.

“Croquettes with barley risotto inside.”

“Whoa, that sounds really amazing…”

“I hope you enjoy it.”

“We will! But wow, whoever ends up married to you will be one lucky girl.” Satsuki, who had been nodding with a smile, suddenly said this while examining Rio’s expression.

“What’s up? Why so suddenly?”

“Well, it’s just that you’re so good at cooking. It’s wonderful having a man who knows how to cook, you know?”

“Thank you…” Rio said shyly.

“While we’re on the topic, do you like girls who know how to cook?”

“Mm… I wouldn’t decide whether I liked someone or not based on their cooking ability.”

“Hmm. So they don’t have to know how to cook?”

“Yeah.”

“But you’d be happy if a girl made you food, right? You might grow more interested in them if they did. Wouldn’t you want to eat the food of the person you like?” Satsuki fired question after question at Rio.

“Well, I suppose that might be true,” Rio answered seriously.

“Would you be happy even if their cooking wasn’t the best?” Christina asked, joining in.

“Let me think. If it’s royalty and nobility, they normally

never cook for themselves, so I'd be happy that they even thought to cook for me. I believe I've said something similar before, actually."

"I see…" Christina hummed in great interest. Flora was also nodding in contemplation.

"Do you have an ideal type of woman you'd like to marry, Haruto?" Orphia asked next.

"An ideal type…"

"For example, a certain facial shape, hair color, hair length, or personality."

"That's a tough question. Can I say whoever I fall in love with becomes my ideal?" Rio answered with a frown.

Satsuki pointed a finger in warning. "No. You have to be more specific."

"E-Erm…"

"Just one thing is enough, so pick something. It's extremely important."

"Uhh… Someone who doesn't feel awkward to be around in silence, I guess?" Rio answered, wracking his brain.

"Hmm. So you prefer a quiet girl?"

"No. I'm not a very talkative person, so it might be nice to be with someone who can talk to me. But there's no need for them to force themselves to keep speaking, and it'd be nice if the quieter times with them are relaxing…"

"I see, I see…" Satsuki nodded in deep understanding. The group then continued to throw various questions at Rio.

There's an oddly large number of questions about marriage, love, and types…

Rio answered all of them sincerely, but he started getting a strange feeling partway through. Then, as though she had picked up on that, Satsuki spoke up.

"We had a girls' talk while you were gone. Love and marriage is the typical topic in a situation like that, you know? We talked about various things, but no one had any experience dating, so we don't really know how men work. You're the man closest to us, so we wanted to ask for your

opinion on a few things," Satsuki said as though she was reciting from memory.

"I see… It sounds like you guys had fun chatting," Rio said in earnest.

"We did. We're normal girls for our age, so it's normal for us to discuss things like that. Isn't that right, Orphia?"

"Yes. We do it often when Haruto isn't around," Orphia said, giggling.

"It may be difficult to call royalty like Flora and myself 'normal,' but we enjoyed the talks very much," Christina said.

"Yes. We heard many new topics and chatted like normal girls, so it was very fun. Thank you for inviting us to this party, Sir Haruto," Flora added.

"Of course. I think you're both very lovely, normal girls," Rio said to the two of them with a gentle smile.

"Thank you very much…"

Christina thanked him somewhat bashfully. Flora was blushing to the tips of her ears.

He really says such things so casually…

Satsuki glared at Rio, looking like she wanted to say something. With his good looks, gentlemanlike demeanor, and talent, there was nothing left to be desired. Indeed, he would be popular like this; in reality, it was clear he was. His only flaw was how he would make flirtatious comments when he was such a blockhead himself.

"He really knows how to give people the wrong idea sometimes," Satsuki muttered with a pout.

"Err… Satsuki?" Rio tilted his head at Satsuki's gaze.

"Nothing!" Satsuki replied in a playful tone. "Now, it's about time we went on our way. There's a line after us, after all," she said, then stood up.

Orphia, Christina, and Flora followed her lead.

"Do you have something after this?" Rio asked. He stood up with them, but Satsuki stopped him.

"We've actually decided to come and talk to you in order.

So you should stay right where you are. The next group will come here once we return."

"I see… Then I'll be waiting here." Rio let out a huff of laughter and sat back down.

"See you later, Haruto."

Satsuki and the others left with the information they'd gathered, ready to share it with the following groups. As an aside, a cooking event for Rio would be held the next day—but that was a story for another time.

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After ten or so minutes had passed…

"Onii-chan!"

The door to the dining hall opened, revealing Latifa's face. Behind her was Liselotte, and they both entered the room through the door.

"So it's Latifa and Liselotte next?" Rio said. This was indeed a rare combination as well.

"Yup! Because the three of us had no time alone the last time we stayed at Liselotte's house. We're the group that was on the bus before being reborn! There's lots we need to talk about, right?" Latifa said, taking her usual seat right beside Rio. It was a topic they could only talk about because they were alone in the dining room.

"The three of us never spoke in our last life, though."

None of them had been particularly close to each other. They had merely been passengers of the same bus that weren't even on speaking terms with each other.

"We were practically three strangers in our past life, yet we're now close enough to have sleepovers with each other. Isn't it incredible?" Liselotte giggled, taking a seat opposite to Rio and Latifa.

"We were reborn and grew up in different places, but we still managed to meet each other again. This is what you'd call a miracle!" Latifa said, eyes sparkling.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Rio said.

“It sure brings back memories… I only started taking the bus after I met you, you know?”

“Wait, really?” Rio’s eyes widened. He hadn’t known that.

“Eheh heh, it’s the truth! After I missed my stop and you sent me home, mom said I could start taking the bus. I was too embarrassed to talk to you until my death, but I really wanted to get closer to you,” Latifa said shyly.

“So if you hadn’t started taking the bus, you wouldn’t have died…?” Rio asked with a somewhat guilty look.

“If you think it’s your fault I died, I’m going to be mad. If I hadn’t been reborn, I wouldn’t have gotten this close to you.”

“I suppose that’s right…”

“I admired you in my past life. The handsome man that saved me. That’s why I don’t regret taking that bus at all! I love this version of you very, very much too!” Latifa hugged Rio’s side, expressing her affection directly with a carefree smile.

“The young woman that watched Haruto so shyly in the bus can now convey her feelings in such a straightforward way. I think that’s lovely.” Liselotte watched Latifa with a charming smile.

“I don’t want to regret anything. I want Onii-chan to know exactly how much I love him.”

“I think I know well enough,” Rio said happily.

“Really?” Latifa gave Rio a searching look.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm… I love you as a sibling, but I also love you in the way Endo Suzune felt for Amakawa Haruto, you know?”

Until now, Latifa had constantly expressed how much she loved Rio. Even though she had been somewhat able to convey those feelings with her attitude, she deliberately avoided saying anything directly about loving him as the opposite sex. However, the earlier conversation with

Charlotte seemed to have acted as a trigger. The words came flowing out naturally.

“I see… Okay.” Rio had frozen for a moment with wide eyes, but he then nodded with a gentle smile. It wasn’t a bother. He wasn’t upset by it. He felt happy to hear it, but—

“I’m sorry… I won’t be able to give you my reply right away.” He wasn’t in the right state of mind right now to be in love with someone. Rio told her his true feelings, without muddling his words.

“That’s fine for now…” Latifa hugged Rio harder in understanding.

“Umm… Am I disturbing you two, perhaps?” Liselotte asked with a frown.

“Not at all. I don’t think I’d be able to say it if I was alone with Onii-chan. I was only able to say it because you were here and we were talking about our past lives. I feel really embarrassed right now, eheh heh.” It seemed Latifa was truly feeling shy, as she had a rarely seen bright red face.

“I see…” Liselotte smiled gently.

“As your little sister, being able to introduce myself as Suzune Amakawa or Amakawa Suzune makes me really happy. So that’s enough for now. Hee hee! Aren’t you jealous, Liselotte?”

“Yup, I’m really envious.” Liselotte nodded, still with a gentle smile.

“If you married Onii-chan, you’d have the Amakawa last name as well.”

“H-Huh?”

“Ah, Liselotte’s face is red. Look, Onii-chan!”

“Th-That’s because you said something like that out of the blue… Even if I wasn’t thinking about it before, I pictured it in my mind,” Liselotte protested with a squeak.

“Amakawa Rikka. Liselotte Amakawa.”

“S-Stop!” Liselotte blushed even more when Latifa said her name with Rio’s last name.

“Come on, Latifa. Don’t tease Liselotte too much,” Rio

scolded her tiredly.

“Okay!” Latifa nodded honestly, then murmured to herself, “I consider Liselotte a rival too, though…”

Liselotte picked up on what she muttered by the movement of her lips, but she maintained her silence as though she hadn’t heard her.

“Hmm. All that’s left is… That’s right!” Latifa clapped her hands together as though remembering something.

“Is something wrong?”

“The truth is, there’s something I haven’t told Liselotte yet… I was thinking of saying it when I saw you again, but…” Latifa looked up at Rio’s face.

“What is it?”

Seated across from Rio, Liselotte looked puzzled.

“Erm… About my ears and stuff…” Latifa whispered in Rio’s ear.

“Oh… You should be able to tell Liselotte. I’m sure she’ll keep it a secret. It’s up to you whether you want to tell her, though,” Rio said without any particular hesitation.

“If the two of you want me to keep it a secret, I won’t tell anyone else,” Liselotte swore with a sincere look.

“Yeah, okay. I hope you won’t be too surprised by this…”

Latifa decided to reveal the truth about her species, and Liselotte spent a long time petting Latifa’s ears and tail with sparkling eyes.

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“It’s our turn next. What do you think of this four-person combination?”

Once Latifa and Liselotte had left, the next people to visit Rio in the dining room were Charlotte, Sara, Alma, and Celia. Charlotte and Alma sat on either side of Rio, while Celia and Sara sat opposite them.

“It’s natural to see Sara and Alma with Celia, but adding Princess Charlotte to this group is rather nice,” Rio said,

giving his honest opinion.

“I’m glad to hear that. In households where the wives are on good terms with each other, the wives make an effort to mix up their lineup to give their husband a fresh feeling every day. It’s also said to prevent dead bedrooms at night.” Charlotte had a bright and cheerful expression, as though to say they’d be able to give the same effect if they were married.

“I-Is that so?” Rio said anxiously, causing his voice to crack. At the same time, Celia and Sara were blushing hard. Alma was turned away as though she had no idea what they were talking about.

“Speaking of which, I noticed today that you refer to Lady Celia without a title, Sir Haruto.”

Charlotte looked at Rio with a pout. He had always addressed Celia with a title when she wasn’t around, so she hadn’t noticed this until today.

“Yes… She’s allowed me to do so in private settings,” Rio confirmed awkwardly.

“Are you okay with that, Lady Sara, Lady Alma?” Charlotte suddenly said.

“Well, we’ve previously discussed how embarrassing it is to suddenly be addressed without a title,” Sara said.

“Indeed,” Alma agreed.

“Hmph. I also wish for Sir Haruto to call me Char.” Charlotte was truly frank with her feelings; she skipped the titleless name and went straight to asking to be called a nickname.

“Aha ha…” Rio laughed weakly.

“Will you call me Char?” Charlotte leaned coquettishly against Rio and pleaded. Celia and Sara narrowed their eyes faintly.

“No, I’m afraid that’s a little…” Rio tried to reject her gently.

“A little what?” With the distance between them still closed, Charlotte maintained her grin and feigned

innocence.

“A little problematic for our social statuses. Especially if you’re not asking me to use your name, but a nickname.”

“Then I shall order you as the Second Princess. Call me Char.”

“Uhm…?”

“Go on, hurry up. If you don’t call me Char, I’ll order you to fulfill a more radical request.”

That wasn’t really a request, but a plain order, Rio thought to himself.

“Char…”

He had a bad feeling about the more radical request, so he had no choice but to call her Char, as ordered.

“Yes…! Now, once more. Call me Char once more.” Charlotte was immersed in ecstasy, repeating her request for Rio in delight.

“Once more, you say?” Rio asked, conflicted.

“Yes please. If you don’t…”

“I-I understand… Char.”

“Once more.”

“…Char.”

Charlotte continued making her request with an enraptured expression mixed with pleasure and delight. Partway through, she placed her head on Rio’s shoulder and started acting like his lover.

“Mmmgh…!” Rio could feel the piercing gazes of Celia and Sara seated opposite him. However, Charlotte continued with her requests without a care.

“Again.”

“Ch-Char.”

“You’re still being shy.” At this point, Charlotte removed her head from Rio’s shoulder to cling to his arm tightly.

“Now, let’s practice losing that shyness. Pet my head and call me Char. Come on, move your hand here…” She took Rio’s free hand and moved to bring it towards her own head.

“P-Princess Charlotte?!” It was at this moment that Celia

shot up from her seat.

“Oh, my. Whatever is the matter?” Charlotte tilted her head curiously.

“D-Don’t you think you’re clinging to Haruto a little too much?”

Although they weren’t standing on ceremony today, Celia had held her tongue due to the status difference between the Second Princess of a foreign country and a count’s daughter. But there was no end to the flirting she was being forced to witness, so she finally reached the limits of her patience.

“Th-That’s right! I stayed silent because you’re a princess, but you’re going too far!” Sara protested strongly.

“But I don’t want to let go yet…” Charlotte took Rio’s face by the hand and gently turned it towards her, bringing him in close to stare at him.

“That’s enough.” Alma, who was seated on the other side of Rio, tugged at his body. She seemed to have a faint pout at her lips as well.

“Hnn… Jeez.”

Charlotte was slightly pulled off balance. She then puffed up her cheeks in an adorable pout.

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“So, last is Miharu and Aishia…” Rio sighed in relief when he saw the last two people appear.

“Sorry, we’re the only ones who aren’t a new combination of girls…” Miharu said apologetically.

“That isn’t a problem at all. I’ve been out traveling for so long that the three of us haven’t been able to spend any time together. It’s actually quite calming. Truly…” The memory of his earlier exchange with Charlotte made Rio all the more sincere.

“Right… That’s good, then.” Miharu seemed a little nervous, as her expression was stiff.

“Erm, would you like to take a seat?” Rio gestured for the two to do just that.

“Okay…” Miharu awkwardly started making her way to the seat across from Rio—when Aishia grabbed her hand.

“Let’s sit in a row.”

“Wha… Ai?”

“You keep letting others sit beside Haruto, even though you always want to be the one sitting there. But there’s no one else around right now, so you should sit next to him.”

“Have I ever said anything about wanting to sit next to him?!” Miharu objected, blushing.

“Go on, sit.” Aishia pushed Miharu into the seat to the right of Rio, then sat in the seat left of him herself.

Miharu kept her head down and looked away from Rio in silence. She was clearly feeling very nervous.

Rio felt somewhat bad for her.

“Haruto…” Aishia said.

“What?”

“Miharu’s nervous,” Aishia stated, making Miharu flinch.

“Yeah…” Rio nodded awkwardly.

“You should call her Mii-chan.”

“Huh?” Rio was taken aback.

“What are you saying, Ai?!” Miharu looked over at Aishia in a fluster. As a result, Rio’s face came into her view, as he was right beside her. When she noticed Rio’s gaze was on her, she quickly averted her eyes in embarrassment.

There was no longer any way of hiding the fact Miharu had feelings for Rio. Even Rio, who was ignorant to people’s feelings being directed at him, had noticed how much she liked him. He had also heard the truth from her very mouth during the banquet.

Ever since that day, Miharu had been too embarrassed to be alone with Rio. He sensed that and had avoided being alone with her as well.

However, that was running away, and Rio had decided that he should say the things he needed to say. It was why he

wasn't about to run from the present situation. It would be insincere of him to keep brushing off his position on all this. He had to tell her his thoughts properly, at least once. He wasn't about to let this rare chance to speak to her alone slip from his hands.

"Mii-chan…"

"Huh?!" Miharu gasped, looking back up at Rio.

"I'm calling you that right now, but in the end, the person I am right now isn't Amakawa Haruto. Because until today, I've lived as Rio…"

That's why he had achieved his revenge on Lucius. He wasn't about to turn into Amakawa Haruto just because he'd done that.

"I… The current 'me' is Rio. I'm Haruto Amakawa, but that isn't Amakawa Haruto. It's a different person. I was raised in this world as Rio, and I'm not about to discard what I've gained as Rio."

Miharu stared at his face, waiting for his words.

"I know I'm an argumentative and tiresome person. I can't become Amakawa Haruto. Once I realized that, I started thinking it'd be better to abandon him. That's why I tried pushing you away. But I still have his memories. I tried to push you away, but I couldn't. I don't know what that means, or if it's okay to be like that, but…" Rio still looked a little anxious as he spoke.

"I may be able to become Rio…who possesses Amakawa Haruto's memories. I'm Rio, but I don't want to run away from the person I was before, in Japan, anymore… That's why to me, you're both Miharu and Mii-chan. I can't interact with you by completely becoming Amakawa Haruto, but these are my true thoughts. This is what I wanted to tell you —you, who sees me as both Rio and Amakawa Haruto…"

"It's both. I think I love both of them. Haruto, from before he was reborn, and Haruto now. I fell in love with the same person twice."

Those were the words Miharu had said to Takahisa, and

the words that had convinced Rio to live as someone who possessed Amakawa Haruto's memories.

"Y-Yeah…" Tears flowed from Miharu's eyes as she nodded along. She finally felt like Rio, who had always been looking far into the distance, was seeing her as his childhood friend again. She was so happy.

"Rio." Aishia called Rio's name gently.

"Aishia…?" Rio's eyes snapped wide open. *Is this the first time that Aishia's called me by the name Rio?* he wondered to himself.

"You're Rio. But you're also Amakawa Haruto. So have confidence. There may be many hardships waiting for you in the future. But you're the one who gave me everything when I had nothing…" Aishia said softly, her hand held over her chest.

"Thanks, Aishia…" Rio smiled gently. He then turned to Miharu resolutely.

"As the one who possesses Amakawa Haruto's memories, there's one thing I have to say to you…as Amakawa Haruto right now. Because I wasn't able to say these words in my last life."

"Umm… What is it?" Miharu braced herself with bated breath.

"Long time no see, Mii-chan. It's nice to finally see you again."

Sorry for running away from you until now. With a radiant smile the normal Rio would never show, he said to Miharu the words of reunion that Amakawa Haruto couldn't say at the entrance ceremony.

Epilogue: Saint of Vengeance

Drastically different from Galarc was a tiny kingdom far out on the edge of the Strahl region. This place was worn down to its limits; it was cold and dry, and it barely got any rain at all. The land had all but withered away, and the citizens were famished.

The only ones prospering were the noble class and above. Only royalty and nobility were capable of an affluent life, and they made up less than one percent of the population. The majority of the kingdom was starving. That was how the kingdom existed until now.

The rich were no gods. Nothing could last forever.

The end came abruptly.

Change was trying to occur; the first change that would greatly shake the Strahl region was happening right at this very moment.

“Raaaaaargh!”

In the capital of the small, starving kingdom, angry voices roared.

Ten thousand people out of a population of a hundred thousand were marching forward. They had shabby weapons and armor—most were holding farming tools. Some weren’t holding anything.

Just minutes ago, those people had broken through the gates to the noble district and were now swarming towards the royal castle. Many of the buildings in the noble district were reduced to rubble along the way.

Leading the way to the castle was a black-haired woman in a holy dress, wielding a beautiful bishop’s staff like a mace. She looked to be around her mid to late twenties.

“Come, my devout believers. The time is now. Follow my

lead!”

The woman raised her staff high in the air and called out to the people. Her voice was nearly wiped out by the angry cries, and it only reached the ten people immediately behind her.

“Today, as of this moment, I will pass the judgment of god onto this rotten kingdom. The rulers who hoarded wealth in the name of god will taste true divine punishment!”

She lifted her staff towards the castle, which stood on the cliff at the deepest end of the noble district, and raised her voice.

“Your anger is my anger! Your vengeance is my vengeance! Thus, I will bring down the hammer of justice on the rotten rulers of this world! Now, everyone! Release all your overflowing rage! Send it all to me!”

There was no stopping her—not her voice, nor her march forward. Their pace was only that of a half jog, but they were getting closer and closer to the castle.

“Send me your anger! And I… I… I shall erase it all! Erase it all, and build it up again! The people, and a society for the people! We must dispose of them! Of the corruption, those rotten rulers! We will create a revolution for the people with our hands! We will create a democracy!”

The only thing reflected in her eyes was the castle on the cliff. She recited her words as though they were borrowed from someone else, yelling them vacantly into the angry crowd. However, the wrath in her eyes was unmistakable. She undoubtedly felt a violent hatred towards something.

And so the woman advanced.

She closed in on the castle at the end of the noble district. However, once she approached within several hundred meters of the foot of the castle, she came to a sudden stop.

The people following her collectively halted as well.

“Vengeance is mine! I will reply!”

The woman looked up at the castle on the cliff while yelling.

“Vengeance is yours! Vengeance is yours!” the people chanted.

“Vengeance is mine! I will reply!” The woman yelled while raising her staff.

“Vengeance is yours! Vengeance is yours!”

The angry yells eventually filled the entirety of the capital.

“Vengeance is yours! Vengeance is yours!”

The woman felt the angry yells of the people against her back. Then, after an amount of time, she swung her staff down.

The moment the end of the staff hit the ground, the earth exploded, violently rising upwards. The explosive energy gathered towards the front, blowing the earth up and towards the cliffside where the castle was.

“Raaaaaagh!”

The people watched the spectacle while yelling passionately. The swelling earth rose like a wave, approaching the cliff.

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Meanwhile, on the highest floor of the royal castle…

“Wh-What? What is this? What have I ever done to them?”

The king of the kingdom was trembling. The view that only those in power could witness up until yesterday no longer existed in the capital. Mere minutes ago, the gate to the noble district was blown away, the buildings in the noble district were destroyed, and the violent crowds were now drawing near.

“I-I’m scared. I’m scared… It’s terrifying, so terrifying…” The king shook violently.

I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m scared. I’m

scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared. I'm scared.

Only one emotion filled his heart, his head—everything. There were a thousand soldiers protecting the castle, but there was no telling if they were reliable enough to hold the fort.

A thousand could be killed in an instant.

Just then, the door to the room where the king was hiding flew open. The commander of the knights appeared.

"Y-Your Majesty! Please flee—"

The knight commander tried to yell, but his words were cut off before he could finish.

The last thing the king saw was the explosion that involved the commander and all the surrounding stone.

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Back at the foot of the cliffside…

"Aaaaaah!"

"As of this moment, this kingdom has obtained salvation! The rotten royals and nobles are gone!" the woman declared proudly.

"Whoooooo!"

The people cheered. They saw the divine sight of the woman—no, the saint—and cheered. The woman raised her staff once again.

"From now on, I will be your spear, your staff, your guide to the proper path. Now, let us build our own country on this land!"

While the saint's voice was drowned out by the cheers of the people, her declaration to found a nation was not.

Afterword

Hello everyone—thank you for reading. This is Yuri Kitayama. As always, thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles,* volume 16,*The Knight's Respite*.

So, how did you find volume 16?

In this volume, Rio's revenge tale has ended and the story is transitioning to the next stage, so I tried to tie up some loose ends and lay the groundwork for the future with a bit of a breather.

Since there are people who like to read from the afterword, I'll refrain from writing any spoilers, but in volume 16 there are people who finally meet each other, the appearance of someone new, and the feeling of everyone finally gathering together, which leaves even me, the author, feeling touched. (In my case, I leave all of the illustrations to my editor and Riv, so I'm always extremely touched when I see the wonderful art!)

From here on, there'll be more developments between the appearing characters, the reappearance of old characters, and the resolution of various plot points that have built up until now, making the story even more interesting. Please look forward to volume 17, as it'll only get better from here.

Speaking of volume 17, the production of the third drama CD has been decided. There'll be over ten characters appearing in it, including popular characters from the past and new faces. Please look forward to the cast announcements! (The plot won't affect the main story, and the contents will mostly focus on daily life during volume 17.)

I’m running out of space, so I’ll wrap things up here. I don’t normally write about my own circumstances, but perhaps once in a while... And so, I still haven’t gone on my first shrine visit of the year. I’m hoping I’ll get to go before this volume goes on sale, but I haven’t filed my taxes yet and I’m scrambling everywhere.

Things got unexpectedly busy from the end of last year, and I’m still following up on adjusting my schedule, but I’m somehow managing to continue my work in good health. Make sure you take care of yourselves too, everyone! Let’s meet again in volume 17 this summer!

Yuri Kitayama
March 2020